

1888

THE MADNESS OF PRIVATE ORTHERIS

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 Madness of Private Ortheris (1888) - From "Plain Tales from the Hills," a collection of stories of life in India. A homesick soldier curses the day he joined the Army; the narrator offers to help him desert.

MADNESS OF ORTHERIS

Oh! Where would I be when my froat was dry? Oh! Where would I be when the bullets fly? Oh! Where would I be when I come to die? Why, Somewheres anigh my chum.

If 'e's liquor 'e'll give me some, If I'm dyin' 'e'll 'old my 'ead, An' 'e'll write 'em 'Ome when I'm dead. Gawd send us a trusty chum!

Barrack-Room Ballad.

MY friends Mulvaney and Ortheris had gone on a shooting-expedition for one day. Learoyd was still in hospital, recovering from fever picked up in Burma.

They sent me an invitation to join them, and were genuinely pained when I brought beer- almost enough beer to satisfy two Privates of the Line... and Me.

"'Twasn't for that we bid you welkim, Sorr,' said Mulvaney, sulkily. "'Twas for the pleasure av your comp'ny.'

Ortheris came to the rescue with- 'Well, 'e won't be none the worse for bringin' liquor with 'im. We ain't a file o' Dooks. We're bloomin' Tommies, ye cantankris Hirishman; an' 'eres your very good 'ealth!' We shot all the forenoon, and killed two pariah-dogs, four green parrots, sitting, one kite by the burning-ghaut, one snake flying, one mud-turtle, and eight crows. Game was plentiful. Then we sat down to tiffin- 'bull-mate an' branbread,' Mulvaney called it- by the side of the river, and took pot shots at the crocodiles in the intervals of cutting up the food with our only pocket-knife. Then we drank up all the beer, and threw the bottles into the water and fired at them. After that, we eased belts and stretched ourselves on the warm sand and smoked. We were too lazy to continue shooting.

Ortheris heaved a big sigh, as he lay on his stomach with his head between his fists. Then he swore quietly into the blue sky.

'Fwhat's that for?' said Mulvaney. 'Have ye not drunk enough?' 'Tott'nim Court Road, an' a gal I fancied there. Wot's the good of sodgerin'?' 'Orth'ris, me son,' said Mulvaney, hastily, "'tis more than likely you've got throuble in your inside wid the beer. I feel that way mesilf whin my liver gets rusty.' Ortheris went on slowly, not heeding the interruption 'I'm a Tommy- a bloomin', eight-anna, dog-stealin' Tommy, with a number instead of a decent name. Wot's the good o' me? If I 'ad a stayed at 'Ome, I might a married that gal and a kep' a little shorp in the 'Ammersmith 'Igh.- "S. Orth'ris, Prac-ti-cal Taxi-der-mist." With a stuff' fox, like they 'as in

the Haylesbury Dairies, in the winder, an' a little case of blue and yaller glass-heyees, an' a little wife to call "shorp!" "shorp!" when the doorbell rung. As it , I'm on'y a Tommy- a Bloomin', Gawd-forsaken, Beer-swillin' Tommy. "Rest on your harms- '. Stan' at- . 'Verse- . Right an' lef'- . Slow- . 'Alt- ont. Rest on your harms- '. With blankcartridge- ." An' that's the end o'me.' He was quoting fragments from Funeral Parties' Orders.

'Stop ut!' shouted Mulvaney. 'Whin you've fired into nothin' as often as me, over a better man than yoursilf, you will not make a mock av thim orders. 'Tis worse than whistlin' the "Dead March" in barricks. An' you full as a tick, an' the sun cool, an' all an' all! I take shame for you. You're no better than a Pagin- you an' your firin' parties an' your glass-eyes. Won't stop ut, Sorr?' What could I do? Could I tell Ortheris anything that he did not know of the pleasures of his life? I was not a Chaplain nor a Subaltern, and Ortheris had a right to speak as he thought fit.

'Let him run, Mulvaney,' I said. 'It's the beer.' 'No! 'Tisn't the beer,' said Mulvaney. 'I know fwwhat's comin'. He's tuk this way now an' agin, an' it's bad- it's bad- for I'm fond av the bhoy.' Indeed, Mulvaney seemed needlessly anxious; but I knew that he looked after Ortheris in a fatherly way.

'Let me talk, let me talk,' said Ortheris, dreamily. 'D'you stop your parrit screamin' of a 'ot day, when the cage is a-cookin' 'is pore little pink toes orf, Mulvaney?' 'Pink toes! D'ye mane to say you've pink toes undher your bullswools, ye blandanderin','- Mulvaney gathered himself together for a terrific denunciation 'schoolmisthress! Pink toes! How much Bass wid the label did that ravin' child dhrink?' "'Tain't Bass,' said Ortheris. 'It's a bitterer beer nor that. It's 'ome-sickness!' 'Hark to him! An' he goin' Home in the in the inside av four months!' 'I don't care. It's all one to me. 'Ow d'you know I ain't 'fraid o' dyin' 'for I gets my discharge paipers?' He recommenced, in a sing-song voice, the Orders.

I had never seen this side of Ortheris' character before, but evidently Mulvaney had, and attached serious importance to it. While Ortheris babbled, with his head on his arms, Mulvaney whispered to me 'He's always tuk this way whin he's been checked overmuch by the childher they make Sarjints nowadays. That an' havin' nothin' to do. I can't make ut out anyways.' 'Well, what does it matter? Let him talk himself through.' Ortheris began singing a parody of 'The Ramrod Corps,' full of cheerful allusions to battle, murder, and sudden death. He looked out across the river

as he sang; and his face was quite strange to me. Mulvaney caught me by the elbow to insure attention.

'Matther? It matthers everything! 'Tis some sort av fit that's on him. I've seen ut. 'Twill hould him all this night, an' in the middle av it he'll get out av his cot an' go rakin' in the rack for his 'coutremints. Thin he'll come over to me an' say, "I'm goin' to Bombay. Answer for me in the mornin'." Thin me an' him will fight as we've done before- him to go an' me to hould him- an' so we'll both come on the books for disturbin' in barracks. I've belted him, an' I've bruk his head, an' I've talked to him, but 'tis no manner av use whin the fit's on him. He's as good a bhoy as ever stepped whin his mind's clear. I know fwhat's comin', though, this night in barracks. Lord send he doesn't loose on me whin I rise to knock him down. 'Tis that that's in my mind day an' night.' This put the case in a much less pleasant light, and fully accounted for Mulvaney's anxiety. He seemed to be trying to coax Ortheris out of the fit; for he shouted down the bank where the boy was lying 'Listen now, you wid the "pore pink toes" an' the glass-eyes! Did you shwim the Irriwaddy at night, behin' me, as a bhoy shud; or were you hidin' under a bed, as you was at Ahmid Kheyl?' This was at once a gross insult and a direct lie, and Mulvaney means it to bring on a fight. But Ortheris seemed shut up in some sort of a trance. He answered slowly, without a sign of irritation, in the same cadenced voice as he had used for his firing-party orders- 'swum the Irriwaddy in the night, as you know, for to take the town of Lungtungpen, nakid an' without fear. where I was at Ahmed Kheyl you know, and four bloomin' Pathans know too. But that was summat to do, an' I didn't think o' dyin'. Now I'm sick to go 'Ome- go 'Omego 'Ome! No, I ain't mammalsick, because my uncle brung me up, but I'm sick for London again; sick for the sounds of 'er, an' the sights of 'er, and the stinks of 'er; orange-peel and hasphalte an' gas comin' in over Vaux'all Bridge. Sick for the rail goin' down to Box'ill, with your gal on your knee an' a new clay pipe in your face. That, an' the Stran' lights where you knows ev'ry one, an' the Copper that takes you up is a old friend that tuk you up before, when you was a little, smitchy boy lying loose 'tween the Temple an' the Dark Harches. No bloomin' guard-mountin', no bloomin' rotten-stone, nor khaki, an' yourself your own master with a gal to take an' see the Humaners practisin' a-hookin' dead corpses out of the Serpentine o' Sundays. An' I lef' all that for to serve the Widder beyond the seas, where there ain't no women and there ain't no liquor worth 'avin', and there ain't nothin' to see, nor do, nor say, nor feel, nor think. Lord love you, Stanley Orth'ris, but you're a bigger bloomin' fool than the rest o' the reg'ment and Mulvaney

wired together! There's the Widder sittin' at 'Ome with a gold crown on 'er 'ead; and 'ere am Hi, Stanley Orth'ris, the Widder's property, a rottin' FOOL!

His voice rose at the end of the sentence, and he wound up with a six-shot Anglo-Vernacular oath. Mulvaney said nothing, but looked at me as if he expected that I could bring peace to poor Ortheris' troubled brain.

I remembered once at Rawal Pindi having seen a man, nearly mad with drink, sobered by being made a fool of. Some regiments may know what I mean. I hoped that we might slake off Ortheris in the same way, though he was perfectly sober. So I said 'What's the use of grousing there, speaking against The Widow?' 'I didn't!' said Ortheris. 'S'elp me, Gawd, I never said a word agin 'er, an' I wouldn't- not if I was to desert this minute!' Here was my opening. 'Well, you meant to, anyhow. What's the use of cracking-on for nothing? Would you slip it now if you got the chance?' 'On'y try me!' said Ortheris, jumping to his feet as if he had been stung.

Mulvaney jumped too. 'Fwhat are you going to do?' said he.

'Help Ortheris down to Bombay or Karachi, whichever he likes. You can report that he separated from you before tiffin, and left his gun on the bank here!' 'I'm to report that- am I?' said Mulvaney, slowly. 'Very well. If Orth'ris manes to desert now, and will desert now, an' you, Sorr, who have been a frind to me an' to him, will help him to ut, I, Terence Mulvaney, on my oath which I've never bruk yet, will report as you say. But-' here he stepped up to Ortheris, and shook the stock of the fowlin-piece in his face- 'your fistes help you, Stanley Orth'ris, if ever I come across you agin!' 'I don't care!' said Ortheris. 'I'm sick o' this dorg's life. Give me a chanst.

Don't play with me. Le' me go!' 'Strip,' said I, 'and change with me, and then I'll tell you what to do.' I hoped that the absurdity of this would check Ortheris; but he had kicked off his ammunition-boots and got rid of his tunic almost before I had loosed my shirtcollar. Mulvaney gripped me by the arm 'The fit's on him: the fit's workin' on him still! By my Honour and Sowl, we shall be accessiry to a desartion yet. Only, twenty-eight days, as you say, Sorr, or fifty-six, but think o' the shame- the black shame to him an' me!' I had never seen Mulvaney so excited.

But Ortheris was quite calm, and, as soon as he had exchanged clothes with me, and I stood up a Private of the Line, he said shortly, 'Now! Come on. What nex'? D'ye mean fair. What must I do to get out o' this 'ere a-Hell?' I told him that, if he would wait

for two or three hours near the river, I would ride into the Station and come back with one hundred rupees. He would, with that money in his pocket, walk to the nearest side-station on the line, about five miles away, and would there take a first-class ticket for Karachi. Knowing that he had no money on him when he went out shooting, his regiment would not immediately wire to the seaports, but would hunt for him in the native villages near the river. Further, no one would think of seeking a deserter in a first-class carriage. At Karachi, he was to buy white clothes and ship, if he could, on a cargo-steamer.

Here he broke in. If I helped him to Karachi, he would arrange all the rest.

Then I ordered him to wait where he was until it was dark enough for me to ride into the Station without my dress being noticed. Now God in His Wisdom has made the heart of the British Soldier, who is very often an unlicked ruffian, as soft as the heart of a little child, in order that he may believe in and follow his officers into tight and nasty places. He does not so readily come to believe in a 'civilian,' but, when he does, he believes implicitly and like a dog. I had had the honour of the friendship of Private Ortheris, at intervals, for more than three years, and we had dealt with each other as man by man. Consequently, he considered that all my words were true, and not spoken lightly.

Mulvaney and I left him in the high grass near the river-bank, and went away, still keeping to the high grass, towards my horse. The shirt scratched me horribly.

We waited nearly two hours for the dusk to fall and allow me to ride off. We spoke of Ortheris in whispers, and strained our ears to catch any sound from the spot where we had left him. But we heard nothing except the wind in the plume-grass.

'I've bruk his head,' said Mulvaney, earnestly, 'time an' agin. I've nearly kilt him wid the belt, an' I can't knock thim fits out av his soft head. No! An' he's not soft, for he's reasonable an' likely by natur'. Fwhat is ut? Is ut his breedin' which is nothin', or his edukashin which he niver got? You that think ye know things, answer me that.' But I found no answer. I was wondering how long Ortheris, in the bank of the river, would hold out, and whether I should be forced to help him to desert, as I had given my word.

Just as the dusk shut down and, with a very heavy heart, I was beginning to saddle up my horse, we heard wild shouts from the river.

The devils had departed from Private Stanley Ortheris, No. 22639, B Company. The loneliness, the dusk, and the waiting had driven them out as I had hoped. We set off at the double and found him plunging about wildly through the grass, with his coat off- my coat off, I mean. He was calling for us like a madman.

When we reached him he was dripping with perspiration, and trembling like a startled horse. We had great difficulty in soothing him. He complained that he was in civilian kit, and wanted to tear my clothes off his body. I ordered him to strip, and we made a second exchange as quickly as possible.

The rasp of his own 'grayback' shirt and the squeak of his boots seemed to bring him to himself. He put his hands before his eyes and said 'Wot was it? I ain't mad, I ain't sunstrook, an' I've bin an' done an' said, and bin an' gone an' done... 'ave I bin an' done?' 'Fwhat have you done?' said Mulvaney. 'You've dishgraced yourself- though that's no matter. You've dishgraced B Comp'ny, an', worst av all, you've dishgraced Me that taught you how for to walk abroad like a man- whin you was a dhirty little, fish-backed little, whimperin' little recruity. As you are now, Stanley Orth'ris!' Ortheris said nothing for a while. Then he unslung his belt, heavy with the badges of half a dozen regiments that his own had lain with, and handed it over to Mulvaney.

'I'm too little for to mill you, Mulvaney,' said he, 'an' you've strook me before; but you can take an' cut me in two with this 'ere if you like.' Mulvaney turned to me.

'Lave me to talk to him, Sorr,' said Mulvaney.

I left, and on my way home thought a good deal over Ortheris in particular, and my friend Private Thomas Atkins, whom I love, in general.

But I could not come to any conclusion of any kind whatever.

THE END