



"THE FIST LANDED TO A HAIR ON THE CHIN-POINT."

(See page 366.)

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*The Comprehension of Private Copper.**

BY RUDYARD KIPLING.



PRIVATE COPPER'S father was a Southdown shepherd, and in early youth Copper had studied under him. Five years' Army service had somewhat blunted Copper's pastoral instincts; but it occurred to him as a memory of the Chalk that sheep, or in this case buck, do not move towards one across turf, or in this case the Colesberg kopjes, unless a stranger, or in this case an enemy, is in the neighbourhood. Copper, helmet back-first, advanced with caution, leaving his mates of the picket half a mile behind. The picket, concerned for its evening meal, did not protest. A year ago it would have been an officer's command, moving in accordance with wise regulations. To-day it paid casual allegiance to a Canadian, nominally a sergeant, actually a trooper of Irregular Horse, discovered convalescent in Naauwpoort Hospital and forthwith employed on odd jobs. Private Copper crawled up the side of a bluish rock-strewn hill, thinly fringed with brush atop, and, remembering how he had peered at Sussex conies through the edge of furze-clumps,

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cautiously parted the dry stems before his face. At the foot of the long slope sat three farmers, smoking. To his natural lust for tobacco was added personal wrath because spiky plants were pricking his belly, and Private Copper slid the backsight up to fifteen hundred yards.

"Good evening, khaki. Please don't move," said a voice on his left, and as he jerked his head round he saw entirely down the barrel of a well-kept Lee-Metford that protruded from a ridiculously insignificant tuft of thorn. Very few graven images have moved less than did Private Copper through the next ten seconds.

"It's nearer seventeen hundred than fifteen," said a young man in an obviously



"HE SAW ENTIRELY DOWN THE BARREL OF A WELL-KEPT LEE-METFORD."

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ready-made suit of grey tweed, possessing himself of Private Copper's rifle. "Thank you. We've got a post of thirty-seven men out yonder. You've eleven—eh? We don't want to kill 'em. We've no quarrel with poor, uneducated khakis, and we don't want prisoners we don't keep. It's demoralizing to both sides—eh?"

Private Copper did not feel called upon to lay down the conduct of guerilla warfare. This dark-skinned, dark-haired, and dark-eyed stranger was his first intimate enemy. He spoke, allowing for a sing-song cadence that recalled to Copper vague memories of Umballa, in precisely the same offensive accent that the young squire of Wilmington had used fifteen years ago when he caught and kicked Alf Copper, a rabbit in each pocket, out of the ditches by Cuckmere. He looked Copper up and down, folded and repocketed a copy of an English weekly which he had been reading, and said, "You seem an inarticulate sort of pig—like the rest of 'em—eh?"

"You," said Copper, thinking, somehow, of the crushing answers he had never given to the young squire, "are a renegid. Why, you ain't Dutch! You're English, same as me!"

"No, khaki. If you can't talk civilly to a gentleman, I'll blow your head off."

Copper cringed, and the action overbalanced him so that he rolled some six or eight feet downhill, under the lee of a rough rock. His brain was working with a swiftness and clarity strange in all his experience of Alf Copper. While he rolled he spoke, and the voice from his own jaws amazed him: "If you did, 'twouldn't make you any less of a renegid." As a useful afterthought he added: "I've sprained my ankle."

The young man was at his side in a flash. Copper made no motion to rise, but, cross-legged under the rock, grunted: "'Ow much did old Krujer pay you for this? What was you wanted for at 'ome? Where did you desert from?"

"Khaki," said the young man, sitting down in his turn, "you're a shade better than your mates. You didn't make much more noise than a yoke of oxen when you tried to come up this hill; but you're an ignorant, diseased beast, like the rest of your people—eh? When you were at the Ragged Schools did they teach you any history, Tommy—'istory, I mean?"

"Don't need no schoolin' to know a renegid," said Copper. He had made three

yards down the hill—out of sight, unless they could see through rocks, of the enemy's smoking party.

The young man laughed and tossed the soldier a black sweating stick of "True Affection." [Private Copper had not smoked a pipe for three weeks.]

"You don't get this—eh?" said the young man. "We do. We take it from the trains as we want it. You can keep the cake—you poor Tommy." Copper rammed the good stuff into his long-cold pipe and puffed luxuriously. Two years ago the sister of Gunner-guard De Souza, East India Railway, had, at a dance given by the sergeants to the Allahabad Railway Volunteers, informed Copper that she could not think of waltzing with "a poo-ah Tommee." Private Copper wondered why that memory should have returned at this hour.

"I'm going to waste a little trouble on you before I kick you and send you back to your picket quite naked—eh? Then you can say how you were overpowered by twenty of us and fired off your last round—like the men we picked up at the drift playing cards at Stryden's Farm—eh? What's your name?"

Private Copper thought for a moment of a far-away housemaid who might still, if the local postman had not gone too far, be interested in his fate. On the other hand, he was, by temperament, economical of the truth. "Pennycuik," he said; "John Pennycuik."

"Thank you. Well, Mr. John Pennycuik, I'm going to teach you a little 'istory, as you'd call it—eh?"

"Drat it!" said Copper, stuffing his left hand in his mouth. "So long since I've smoked I've burned my 'and—an' the pipe's dropped too. No objection to my movin' down to fetch it, is there, sir?"

"I've got you covered," said the young man, graciously, and Private Copper, hopping on one leg, because of his sprain, recovered the pipe yet another three yards downhill and squatted under another rock slightly larger than the first. A roundish boulder made a pleasant rest for his captor, who sat cross-legged once more, facing Copper, his rifle across his knee, his hand on the trigger-guard.

"Well, Mr. Pennycuik, as I was going to tell you. A little after you were born in your English workhouse, your kind, honourable, brave country, England, sent an English gentleman, who could not tell a lie, to say that so long as the sun rose and the rivers

ran in their courses the Transvaal would belong to England. Did you ever hear that, khaki—eh?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Copper. The sentence about the sun and the rivers happened to be a very aged jest of McBride, the professional humorist of D Company, when they discussed the probable length of the war. Copper had thrown beef-tins at McBride in the grey dawn of many weary camps for intoning it.

"Of course you would not. Now, man, I te'l you, listen." He spat aside and cleared his throat. "Because of that little promise my father he moved into the Transvaal and

"But my father (he knows better now) kept on believing in the English. I suppose it was the pretty talk about the rivers and suns that cheated him—eh? Anyhow, he believed in his own country. In his own country. So he was a little startled when he found himself handed over to the Transvaal as a prisoner of war. That's what it came to, Tommy—a prisoner of war. You know what that is. England was too honourable and too gentlemanly to take trouble. There were no terms made for my father."

"So 'e made 'em 'imself. Useful old bird." Private Copper sliced up another pipeful and looked out across the wrinkled



"THERE WERE NO TERMS MADE FOR MY FATHER."

bought a farm—a little place of twenty or thirty thousand acres, don't—you-know."

The tone, in spite of the sing-song cadence fighting with the laboured parody of the English drawl, was unbearably like the young Wilmington squire's, and Copper found himself saying: "I ought to. I've 'elped burn some."

"Yes; you'll pay for that later. And he opened a store."

"Ho! Shopkeeper, was he?"

"The kind you call 'sir' and sweep the floor for, Pennyquik. . . . You see, in those days one used to believe in the British Government. My father did. Then the Transvaal wiped thee earth with the English. Beat 'em six times running. You know *thatt*—eh?"

"That's what we've come 'ere for."

sea of kopjes through which came the roar of the rushing Orange River, so unlike quiet Cuckmere.

The young man's face darkened. "I think I shall sjambok you myself when I've quite done with you. *No*, my father (he was a fool) made no terms for eight years—ninety-six months, and for every day of them the Transvaal made his life hell for my father and—his people."

"I'm glad to hear that," said the impenitent Copper.

"Are you? You can think of it when I'm cutting the skin off your back—eh? . . . My father lost everything—everything—down to his self-respect. You don't know what *that* means—eh?"

"Why?" said Copper. "I'm smokin' baccy stole by a renegid. Why wouldn't I know?"

If it came to a flogging on that hillside there might be a chance of reprisals. Of course, he might be marched to the Boer camp in the next valley and there operated upon; but Army life teaches no man to cross a bridge till he comes to it.

"Yes, after eight years my father, cheated by your dog of a country, he found out who was the upper dog in South Africa."

"That's me," said Copper, valiantly. "If it takes another 'alf century, it's me an' the likes of me."

"You? Heaven help you! You'll be screaming at a waggon-wheel in an hour. . . . Then it struck my father that he'd like to shoot the people who'd betrayed him. You—you—*you!* He told his son all about it. He told him never to trust the English. He told him to do them all the harm he could. Man, I tell you, I don't want much telling. I was born in the Transvaal—I'm a burgher. If my father didn't love the English, by the Lord, mann, I tell you I hate them from the bottom of my soul!"

The voice quavered and ran high. Once more, for no conceivable reason, Private Copper found his inward eye turned upon Umballa cantonments of a dry, dusty afternoon when the saddle-coloured son of a local hotel-keeper came to the barracks to complain of a theft of fowls. He saw the dark face, the plover's-egg-tinted eyeballs, and the thin, excited hands. Above all, he remembered the passionate, queerly-strung words. Slowly he returned to South Africa, using the very sentence his sergeant had used to the poultry-man.

"Go on with your complaint. I'm listenin'."

"Complaint! Complain about *you*, you ox! We strip and kick your sort by thousands."

The young man rocked to and fro above the rifle, whose muzzle thus deflected itself from the pit of Private Copper's stomach. His face was working with passion.

"Yess. I'm a Transvaal burgher. Ha! It took us about twenty years to find out how rotten you were—*we* knew and you know it now. Your Army it is the laughing-stock of the Continent." He tapped the newspaper in his pocket. "You think you're going to win, you poor fools. Your people—your own people—your silly, rotten fools of people will crawl out of it as they did after Majuba. They are beginning now. Look what your own working classes, the diseased, lying, drink-

ing white stuff that you come out of, are saying." He thrust the English weekly doubled at the leading article on Copper's knee. "See what dirty dogs your masters are. They do not even back you in your dirty work. *We* cleared the country down to Ladysmith—to Estcourt. *We* cleared the country down to Colesberg."

"Yes. We 'ad to clean up be'ind you. Mucky, I call it."

"You've had to stop farm-burning because your people daren't do it. They were afraid. You daren't kill a spy! You daren't shoot a spy when you catch him in your own uniform! You daren't touch our loyal people in Cape Town! Your masters won't let you. You will feed our women and children till we are quite ready to take them back. *You* can't put your cowardly noses out of the towns you say you've occupied. *You* daren't move a convoy twenty miles. You think you've done something? You've done nothing, and you've taken a quarter of a million men to do it! There isn't a nigger in South Africa that doesn't obey us if we lift our finger. You pay the stuff four pound a month and they lie to you. *We* flog 'em, as I shall flog you."

He clasped his hands together and leaned forward his out-thrust chin within two feet of Copper's left or pipe hand.

"Yuss," said Copper, "it's a fair knock-out." The fist landed to a hair on the chin-point, the neck snicked like a gun-lock, and the back of the head crashed on the boulder behind.

Copper grabbed up both rifles, unshipped the crossed bandoleers, drew forth the English weekly, and picking up a lax hand looked long and intently at the finger-nails.

"No! Not a sign of it there," he said. "Is nails are as clean as mine, but he talks just like 'em, though. And he's a landlord, too! A landed proprietor! Shockin', I call it."

The arms began to flap with returning consciousness. Private Copper rose up and whispered: "If you open your head I'll bash it." There was no suggestion of sprain in the flung-back left boot. "Now walk in front of me, both arms perpendicularly elevated. I'm only a third-class shot, so if you don't object I'll rest the muzzle of my rifle lightly but firmly on your collar-button, thus coverin' what I 'ave 'eard called the serviceable vertebree. If your friends see us thus engaged, you pray—'ard."

Private and prisoner stumbled downhill. No shots broke the peace of that adorable

afternoon, but once the young man checked and was violently sick.

"There's a lot of things I could say to you," Copper observed, at the close of the paroxysm, "but it doesn't matter. Look 'ere, you call me 'pore Tommy' again."

The prisoner hesitated.

"Oh, I ain't goin' to do anythin' to you. I'm reconnoiterin' on my own. Say 'pore Tommy,' like a bloomin' parrot, 'alf-a-dozen times."

The prisoner obeyed.

"*That's* what's been puzzlin' me since I 'ad the pleasure o' meetin' you," said Copper. "You ain't 'alf caste, but you talk *chee-chee-pukka bazar chee-chee. Pro-ceed, Antonio.*"

"Halloa!" said the sergeant of the picket, twenty minutes later, "where did you round him up?"

"On the top o' yonder craggy mounting. There's a mob of 'em sitting round their Bibles seventeen 'undred yards (you said it was seventeen 'undred?) t'other side—an' I

only a loyal farmer with dynamite in his boots? Tell us all about it, burjer!"

"You leave my prisoner alone," said Private Copper. "'E's 'ad losses an' trouble; an' it's in the family, too. 'E thought I never read the papers, so 'e kindly lent me one, an' 'e explained it to me as patronizin' as a Militia subaltern doin' Railway Staff Officer. 'E's a left-over from Majuba— one of the worst kind, an' 'earin' the evidence as I did I don't exactly repre'end 'im. It was this way."

To the picket Private Copper held forth for ten minutes on the life-history of the captive. Allowing for some purple patches, it was an absolutely fair rendering.

"But what I *dis*-liked was this baccy-priggin' beggar, oo's people, on 'is own showin', couldn't 'ave been more than thirty or forty years on this Gawd-forsaken dust-'eap, comin' the squire over me. They're all parsons—we know *that*; but parson *an'* squire is a bit too thick for Alf Copper. Why, I



"'THEY'RE ONLY FO-AR TOMMIES,' SAID COPPER."

want some coffee." He sat down on the smoke-blackened stones by the fire.

"'Ow did you get 'im?" said McBride, professional humorist, quietly filching the English weekly from under his armpit.

"On the chin—while 'e was waggin' it at me."

"What is 'e? 'Nother Colonial rebel to be 'orribly disenfranchised, or a Cape M.P., or

caught 'im in the shameful act of tryin' to start a aristocracy on a gun an' a waggon an' a shambuk. Yes; that's what it was: a bloomin' aristocracy."

"No, it weren't," said McBride, at length, on the dirt, above the purloined weekly. "You're the aristocrat, Alf. Old *Jerrold's* givin' it you 'ot. You're the uneducated 'ireling of a cal—callous aristocracy which 'as

sold itself to the 'Ebrew financier. Mean-time, Ducky" — he ran his finger down a column of assorted paragraphs — "you're slakin' your brutal instincts in furious excesses. Shriekin' women an' desolated 'omesteads is what you enjoy, Alf. . . . Halloa, what's a smokin' 'ekt&comb?"

"'Ere! Let's look. 'Aven't seen a spicy paper for a year. 'Good old *Ferrold's!*" Pinewood and Moppett, Reservists, flung themselves on McBride's shoulders, pinning him to the ground.

"Lie over your own bloomin' side of the bed, an' we can all look," he protested.

"They're only po-ah Tommies," said Copper, apologetically, to the prisoner. "Po-ah uneducated khakis. *They* don't know what they're fightin' for. They're lookin' for what the diseased, lying, drinkin' white stuff that they come from is sayin' about 'em!"

The prisoner set down his tin of coffee and stared helplessly round the circle.

"I—I don't understand them."

well provide an escort for your prisoner. He's waitin'."

"Arf a mo, sergeant," said McBride, still reading. "'Ere's Old Barbarity on the ramp again with some of 'is lady-friends, oo don't like concentration camps. 'Wish they'd visit ours. Pinewood's a married man. He'd know 'ow to be'ave."

"Well, I ain't goin' to amuse Antonio alone. 'E's gettin' peevisish," cried Copper. "One of you thieves read out what's vexin' Old Barbarity an' 'is 'arem these days. You'd better listen, Antonio, because, afterwards, I'm goin' to fall out an' perpetrate nameless barbarities on you, for to keep up the reputation of the British Army."

From that English weekly, to bar out which a large and perspiring staff of Press censors toil seven days of the week at Cape Town, did Pinewood of the Reserve read unctuously excerpts of the speeches of the accredited leaders of His Majesty's Opposition. The night-picket arrived in the middle of it, but stayed entranced without paying any compli-



"HANDS UP, PRISONER!"

The Canadian sergeant, picking his teeth with a thorn, nodded sympathetically.

"If it comes to that, *zee* don't in my country! . . . Say, boys, when you're through with your English mail you might's

ments, till Pinewood had entirely finished the leading article.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said Alf Copper, hitching up what remained to him of trousers; "you've 'eard what 'e's been fed

up with. *Do* you blame the beggar? 'Cause I don't! . . . Leave 'im alone, McBride. He's my first an' only prisoner, an' I'm goin' to walk 'ome with him, ain't I, Ducky? . . . Fall in, Antonio. It's Bermuda, or Umballa, or Ceylon for you, and—I'd give a month's pay to be in your little shoes."

As not infrequently happens, the actual moving off the ground broke the prisoner's nerve. He stared at the tinted hills round him, gasped, and began to struggle—kicking, swearing, weeping, and fluttering all together.

"Pore beggar—oh! pore, *pore* beggar!" said Alf, leaning in on one side of him, while Pinewood blocked him on the other.

"Let me go! Let me go! Mann, I tell you, let me go—"

"'E screams like a woman!" said McBride. "They'll 'ear 'im five miles off."

"There's one or two ought to 'ear 'im—in England," said Copper, putting aside a wildly waving arm.

"Married, ain't 'e?" said Pinewood. "I've seen 'em go like this before—just at the last. 'Old on, old man. No one's goin' to kill you."

The last of the sun threw the enormous shadow of a kopje over the little, anxious, wriggling group.

"Quit that," said the sergeant of a sudden. "You're only making him worse. Hands *up*, prisoner! Now you get a holt of yourself, or this'll go off!"

And indeed the revolver-barrel square at the man's panting chest seemed to act like a tonic: he choked, recovered himself, and fell in between Copper and Pinewood.

As the picket neared the camp it broke into song that was heard among the officers' tents:—

'E sent us 'is blessin' from London town
(The beggar that kep' the cordite down).
But what do we care if 'e smile or frown?—
The beggar that kep' the cordite down.
The mildly nelarious,
Wildly larbarious
Beggar that kep' the cordite down.

Said a captain a mile away: "Why are they singing *that*? We haven't had a mail for a month, have we?"

An hour later said the same captain to his servant: "Jenkins, I understand the picket have got a—got a newspaper off a prisoner to-day. I wish you could lay hands on it, Jenkins. Copy of the *Times*, I think."

"Yes, sir. Copy of the *Times*, sir," said Jenkins, without a quiver, and went forth to make his own arrangements.

"Copy of the *Times*?" said the blameless Alf, from under a blanket. "I ain't a member of the Soldiers' Institoot. Go an' look in the reg'mental readin'-room—Veldt Row, Kopje Street, second turnin' to the left between 'ere an' Naauwpoort."

Jenkins summarized briefly in a tense whisper the few things that Alf Copper need not be.

"But *my* particular copy of the *Times* is specially prohibited by the censor from corruptin' the morals of the Army. Get a written order from K., properly countersigned, an' I'll think about it."

"I've got all you want," said Jenkins. "Hurry up. I want to 'ave a squint myself."

Something gurgled in the darkness, and Private Copper fell back smacking his lips.

"Gawd bless my prisoner and make me a good boy. Amen. 'Ere you are, Jenkins. It's dirt cheap at a tot."

