

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

1 *The Ballad of Boh Da Thone*

(Burma War, 1883-85)

*This is the ballad of Boh Da Thone,
Erst a Pretender to Theebaw's throne,
Who harried the District of Alalone:
How he met with his fate and the V. P. P.
At the hand of Harendra Mukerji,
Senior Gomashta, G. B. T.*

Boh Da Thone was a warrior bold:
His sword and his rifle were bossed with gold,

And the Peacock Banner his henchmen bore
Was stiff with bullion, but stiffer with gore.

He shot at the strong and he slashed at the weak 5
From the Salween scrub to the Chindwin teak:

He crucified noble, he scarified mean,
He filled old ladies with kerosene:

While over the water the papers cried, 10
"The patriot fights for his countryside!"

But little they cared for the Native Press,
The worn white soldiers in khaki dress,

Who tramped through the jungle and camped in the byre,
Who died in the swamp and were tombed in the mire,

Who gave up their lives, at the Queen's Command, 15
For the Pride of their Race and the Peace of the Land.

Now, first of the foemen of Boh Da Thone
Was Captain O'Neil of the Black Tyrone,

And his was a Company, seventy strong,
Who hustled that dissolute Chief along. 20

There were lads from Galway and Louth and Meath
Who went to their death with a joke in their teeth,

And worshipped with fluency, fervour, and zeal
The mud on the boot-heels of "Crook" O'Neil.

But ever a blight on their labours lay, 25
And ever their quarry would vanish away,

Till the sun-dried boys of the Black Tyrone
Took a brotherly interest in Boh Da Thone,

And, sooth, if pursuit in possession ends,
The Boh and his trackers were best of friends. 30

The word of a scout — a march by night —
A rush through the mist — a scattering fight —

A volley from cover — a corpse in the clearing —
A glimpse of a loin-cloth and heavy jade earring —

The flare of a village — the tally of slain — 35
And . . . the Boh was abroad on the raid again!

They cursed their luck, as the Irish will,
They gave him credit for cunning and skill,

They buried their dead, they bolted their beef,
And started anew on the track of the thief, 40

Till, in place of the "Kalends of Greece," men said,

“When Crook and his darlings come back with the head.”

They had hunted the Boh from the hills to the plain —
He doubled and broke for the hills again:

They had crippled his power for rapine and raid, 45
They had routed him out of his pet stockade,

And at last, they came, when the Daystar tired,
To a camp deserted — a village fired.

A black cross blistered the morning-gold,
But the body upon it was stark and cold. 50

The wind of the dawn went merrily past,
The high grass bowed her plumes to the blast,

And out of the grass, on a sudden, broke
A spirtle of fire, a whorl of smoke —

And Captain O’Neil of the Black Tyrone 55
Was blessed with a slug in the ulnar-bone —
The gift of his enemy Boh Da Thone.

(Now a slug that is hammered from telegraph-wire
Is a thorn in the flesh and a rankling fire.)

The shot-wound festered — as shot-wounds may 60
In a steaming barrack at Mandalay.

The left arm throbbed, and the Captain swore,
“I’d like to be after the Boh once more!”

The fever held him — the Captain said,
“I’d give a hundred to look at his head!” 65

The Hospital punkahs creaked and whirred,
But Babu Harendra (Gomashta) heard.

He thought of the cane-brake, green and dank,
That girdled his home by the Dacca tank.

He thought of his wife and his High School son, 70
He thought — but abandoned the thought — of a gun.

His sleep was broken by visions dread
Of a shining Boh with a silver head.

He kept his counsel and went his way,
And swindled the cartmen of half their pay. 75

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And the months went on, as the worst must do,
And the Boh returned to the raid anew.

But the Captain had quitted the long-drawn strife,
And in far Simoorie had taken a wife;

And she was a damsel of delicate mould, 80
With hair like the sunshine and heart of gold,

And little she knew the arms that embraced
Had cloven a man from the brow to the waist:

And little she knew that the loving lips
Had ordered a quivering life's eclipse, 85

Or the eye that lit at her lightest breath
Had glared unawed in the Gates of Death.

(For these be matters a man would hide,
As a general rule, from an innocent Bride.)

And little the Captain thought of the past, 90
And, of all men, Babu Harendra last.

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But slow, in the sludge of the Kathun road,
The Government Bullock Train toted its load.

Speckless and spotless and shining with *ghi*,
In the rearmost cart sat the Babu-jee; 95

And ever a phantom before him fled
Of a scowling Boh with a silver head.

Then the lead-cart stuck, though the coolies slaved,
And the cartmen flogged and the escort raved,

And out of the jungle, with yells and squeals, 100
Pranced Boh Da Thone, and his gang at his heels!

Then belching blunderbuss answered back
The Snider's snarl and the carbine's crack,

And the blithe revolver began to sing
To the blade that twanged on the locking-ring, 105

And the brown flesh blued where the bayonet kissed,
As the steel shot back with a wrench and a twist,

And the great white oxen with onyx eyes
Watched the souls of the dead arise,

And over the smoke of the fusillade 110
The Peacock Banner staggered and swayed.

The Babu shook at the horrible sight,
And girded his ponderous loins for flight,

But Fate had ordained that the Boh should start

On a lone-hand raid of the rearmost cart, 115

And out of that cart, with a bellow of woe,
The Babu fell — flat on the top of the Boh!

For years had Harendra served the State,
To the growth of his purse and the girth of his *pêt*.

There were twenty stone, as the tally-man knows, 120
On the broad of the chest of this best of Bohs.

And twenty stone from a height discharged
Are bad for a Boh with a spleen enlarged.

Oh, short was the struggle — severe was the shock —
He dropped like a bullock — he lay like a block; 125

And the Babu above him, convulsed with fear,
Heard the labouring life-breath hissed out in his ear.

And thus in a fashion undignified
The princely pest of the Chindwin died.

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Turn now to Simoorie, where, all at his ease, 130
The Captain is petting the Bride on his knees,

Where the *whit* of the bullet, the wounded man's scream
Are mixed as the mist of some devilish dream —

Forgotten, forgotten the sweat of the shambles
Where the hill-daisy blooms and the grey monkey gambols, 135

From the sword-belt set free and released from the steel,
The Peace of the Lord is on Captain O'Neil!

Up the hill to Simoorie — most patient of drudges —
The bags on his shoulder, the mail-runner trudges.

“For Captain O’Neil Sahib. One hundred and ten 140
“Rupees to collect on delivery.”

Then

(Their breakfast was stopped while the screw-jack and hammer
Tore waxcloth, split teak-wood, and chipped out the dammer;)

Open-eyed, open-mouthed, on the napery’s snow, 145
With a crash and a thud, rolled — the Head of the Boh!

And gummed to the scalp was a letter which ran: —

“IN FIELDING FORCE SERVICE.

“*Encampment,*

“10th Jan. 150

“Dear Sir, — I have honour to send, *as you said,*
“For final approval (see under) Boh’s Head;

“Was took by myself in most bloody affair.
“By High Education brought pressure to bear.

“Now violate Liberty, time being bad, 155
“To mail V. P. P. (rupees hundred) Please add

“Whatever Your Honour can pass. Price of Blood
“Much cheap at one hundred, and children want food.

“So trusting Your Honour will somewhat retain
“True love and affection for Govt. Bullock Train, 160

“And show awful kindness to satisfy me,

“I am,

“Graceful Master,

“Your

“H. MUKERJI.” 165

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As the rabbit is drawn to the rattlesnake’s power,

As the smoker's eye fills at the opium hour,

As a horse reaches up to the manger above,
As the waiting ear yearns for the whisper of love,

From the arms of the Bride, iron-visaged and slow, 170
The Captain bent down to the Head of the Boh.

And e'en as he looked on the Thing where It lay
'Twixt the winking new spoons and the napkins' array,

The freed mind fled back to the long-ago days —
The hand-to-hand scuffle — the smoke and the blaze — 175

The forced march at night and the quick rush at dawn —
The banjo at twilight, the burial ere morn —

The stench of the marshes — the raw, piercing smell
When the overhand stabbing-cut silenced the yell —

The oaths of his Irish that surged when they stood 180
Where the black crosses hung o'er the Kuttamow flood.

As a derelict ship drifts away with the tide
The Captain went out on the Past from his Bride,

Back, back, through the springs to the chill of the year,
When he hunted the Boh from Maloon to Tsaleer. 185

As the shape of a corpse dimmers up through deep water,
In his eye lit the passionless passion of slaughter,

And men who had fought with O'Neil for the life
Had gazed on his face with less dread than his wife.

For she who had held him so long could not hold him — 190
Though a four-month Eternity should have controlled him! —

But watched the twin Terror — the head turned to head —
The scowling, scarred Black, and the flushed savage Red —

The spirit that changed from her knowing and flew to
Some grim hidden Past she had never a clue to. 195

But It knew as It grinned, for he touched it unfearing,
And muttered aloud, “So you kept that jade earring!”

Then nodded, and kindly, as friend nods to friend,
“Old man, you fought well, but you lost in the end.”

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The visions departed, and Shame followed Passion: — 200
“He took what I said in this horrible fashion?”

“*I’ll* write to Harendra!” With language unsainted
The Captain came back to the Bride . . . who had fainted

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And this is a fiction? No. Go to Simoorie
And look at their baby, a twelve-month old Hourie, 205

A pert little, Irish-eyed Kathleen Mavournin —
She’s always about on the Mall of a mornin’ —

And you’ll see, if her right shoulder-strap is displaced,
This: *Gules* upon *argent*, a Boh’s Head, *erased!*

1888

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