

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

20 *The Last Suttee*

*Not many years ago a King died in one of the Rajpoot States. His wives, disregarding the orders of the English against Suttee, would have broken out of the palace and burned themselves with the corpse, had not the gates been barred. But one of them, disguised as the King's favourite dancing-girl, passed through the line of guards and reached the pyre. There, her courage failing, she prayed her cousin, a baron of the King's court, to kill her. This he did, not knowing who she was.*

Udai Chand lay sick to death  
    In his hold by Gungra hill.  
All night we heard the death-gongs ring,  
For the soul of the dying Rajpoot King,  
All night beat up from the women's wing                     5  
    A cry that we could not still.

All night the barons came and went,  
    The Lords of the Outer Guard.  
All night the cressets glimmered pale  
On Ulwar sabre and Tonk jezail,                                     10  
Mewar headstall and Marwar mail,  
    That clinked in the palace yard.

In the Golden Room on the palace roof  
    All night he fought for air:  
And there were sobbings behind the screen,                     15  
Rustle and whisper of women unseen,  
And the hungry eyes of the Boondi Queen  
    On the death she might not share.

He passed at dawn — the death-fire leaped  
    From ridge to river-head,                                     20  
From the Malwa plains to the Abu scars:  
And wail upon wail went up to the stars  
Behind the grim zenana-bars,

When they knew that the King was dead.

The dumb priest knelt to tie his mouth 25  
 And robe him for the pyre.  
 The Boondi Queen beneath us cried:  
 "See, now, that we die as our mothers died  
 "In the bridal-bed by our master's side!  
 "Out, women! — to the fire!" 30

We drove the great gates home apace —  
 White hands were on the sill —  
 But ere the rush of the unseen feet  
 Had reached the turn to the open street,  
 The bars shot down, the guard-drum beat — 35  
 We held the dovecot still!

A face looked down in the gathering day,  
 And laughing spoke from the wall:  
 "Ohé, they mourn here: let me by —  
 "Azizun, the Lucknow nautch-girl, I! 40  
 "When the house is rotten, the rats must fly,  
 "And I seek another thrall.

"For I ruled the King as ne'er did Queen, —  
 "To-night the Queens rule me!  
 "Guard them safely, but let me go, 45  
 "Or ever they pay the debt they owe  
 "In scourge and torture!" She leaped below,  
 And the grim guard watched her flee.

They knew that the King had spent his soul 50  
 On a North-bred dancing-girl:  
 That he prayed to a flat-nosed Lucknow god,  
 And kissed the ground where her feet had trod,  
 And doomed to death at her drunken nod,  
 And swore by her lightest curl.

We bore the King to his fathers' place, 55

Where the tombs of the Sun-born stand:  
Where the grey apes swing, and the peacocks preen  
On fretted pillar and jewelled screen,  
And the wild boar couch in the house of the Queen  
On the drift of the desert sand. 60

The herald read his titles forth  
We set the logs aglow:  
“Friend of the English, free from fear,  
“Baron of Luni to Jeysulmeer,  
“Lord of the Desert of Bikaner, 65  
“King of the Jungle, — go!”

All night the red flame stabbed the sky  
With wavering wind-tossed spears:  
And out of a shattered temple crept  
A woman who veiled her head and wept, 70  
And called on the King — but the great King slept,  
And turned not for her tears.

One watched, a bow-shot from the blaze,  
The silent streets between,  
Who had stood by the King in sport and fray, 75  
To blade in ambush or boar at bay,  
And he was a baron old and grey,  
And kin to the Boondi Queen.

Small thought had he to mark the strife —  
Cold fear with hot desire — 80  
When thrice she leaped from the leaping flame,  
And thrice she beat her breast for shame,  
And thrice like a wounded dove she came  
And moaned about the fire.

He said: “O shameless, put aside 85  
“The veil upon thy brow!  
“Who held the King and all his land  
“To the wanton will of a harlot’s hand!

“Will the white ash rise from the blistered brand?  
“Stoop down, and call him now!” 90

Then she: “By the faith of my tarnished soul,  
“All things I did not well  
“I had hoped to clear ere the fire died,  
“And lay me down by my master’s side  
“To rule in Heaven his only bride, 95  
“While the others howl in Hell.

“But I have felt the fire’s breath,  
“And hard it is to die!  
“Yet if I may pray a Rajpoot lord  
“To sully the steel of a Thakur’s sword 100  
“With base-born blood of a trade abhorred . . .”  
And the Thakur answered, “Ay.”

He drew and struck: the straight blade drank  
The life beneath the breast.  
“I had looked for the Queen to face the flame, 105  
“But the harlot dies for the Rajpoot dame —  
“Sister of mine, pass, free from shame.  
“Pass with thy King to rest!”

The black log crashed above the white:  
The little flames and lean, 110  
Red as slaughter and blue as steel,  
That whistled and fluttered from head to heel,  
Leaped up anew, for they found their meal  
On the heart of — the Boondi Queen!

1889

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