## THE KING'S TASK

After the sack of the City, when Rome was sunk to a name,
In the years when the Lights were darkened, or ever Saint Wilfrid came.
Low on the borders of Britain, the ancient poets sing,
Between the cliff and the forest there ruled a Saxon king.

Stubborn all were his people, a stark and a jealous horde--
Not to be schooled by the cudgel, scarce to be cowed by the sword;
Blithe to turn at their pleasure, bitter to cross in their mood,
And set on the ways of their choosing as the hogs of Andred's Wood ...

They made them laws in the Witan, the laws of flaying and fine,
Folkland, common and pannage, the theft and the track of kine;
Statutes of tun and of market for the fish and the malt and the meal,
The tax on the Bramber packhorse and the tax on the Hastings keel.
Over the graves of the Druids and over the wreck of Rome
Rudely but deeply they bedded the plinth of the days to come.
Behind the feet of the Legions and before the Northman's ire,
Rudely but greatly begat they the body of state and of shire.
Rudely but greatly they laboured, and their labour stands till now
If we trace on our ancient headlands the twist of their eight-ox plough.

## THE COMPREHENSION OF PRIVATE COPPER

Private Copper's father was a Southdown shepherd; in early youth Copper

had studied under him. Five years' army service had somewhat blunted Private 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 full 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 as such. To-day it paid casual allegiance to a Canadian, nominally a sergeant, actually a trooper of Irregular Horse, discovered convalescent in Naauwport 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, 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 protruding from an 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 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 have no quarrel with poor uneducated Khakis, and we do not want prisoners we do not keep. It is demoralising to both sides--eh?"

Private Cooper 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 clipped 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 of Cuckmere. The enemy looked Copper up and down, folded and re-pocketed a copy of an English weekly which he had been reading, and said: "You seem an inarticulate sort of swine--like the rest of them--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 cannot talk civilly to a gentleman I will 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 are a shade better than your mates. You did not make much more noise than a yoke of oxen when you tried to come up this hill, but you are 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 po-ah Tommee." 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 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--eh?"

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?"

"'Ow!" 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. This 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 wet and dry camps for intoning it.

"Of course you would not. Now, mann, I tell you, listen." He spat aside and cleared his throat. "Because of that little promise, my father he moved into the Transvaal and 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, Pennycuik.... 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. They beat

them six times running. You know thatt--eh?"

"Isn't what we've come 'ere for."

"But my father (he knows better now) kept on believing in the English. I suppose it was the pretty talk about rivers and suns that cheated him--eh? Anyhow, he believed in his own country. Inn his own country. So--you see--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--eh? 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 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 taking the skin off your back--eh?... My father, he lost everything--everything down to his self-respect. You don't know what thatt 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 bridges unnecessarily.

"Yes, after eight years, my father, cheated by your bitch 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 wagon-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. Mann, 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! Complaint 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 dusky with rage.

"Yess, I'm a Transvaal burgher. It took us about twenty years to find out how rotten you were. We know 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, drinking 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. Messy, 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 loyall people in Cape Town! Your masters wont 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 of 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 pounds 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 cross-bandoliers, drew forth the English weekly, and picking up the lax hands, looked long and intently at the fingernails.

"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--coverin' the serviceable vertebree. If your friends see us thus engaged, you pray--'ard."

Private and prisoner staggered downhill. No shots broke the peace of the afternoon, but once the young man checked and was 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 recon-noiterin' in my own. Say 'pore Tommy' '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. Proceed."

"Hullo," 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 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 Copper's armpit.

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

"What is 'e? 'Nother Colonial rebel to be 'orribly disenfranchised, or a Cape Minister, or only a loyal farmer with dynamite in both 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 his very own Jerrold's Weekly--an' 'e explained it to me as patronisin' as a--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 blame 'im. It was this way."

To the picket Private Copper held forth for ten minutes on the life-history of his captive. Allowing for some purple patches, it was an absolute 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 in the coun--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 caught 'im in the shameful act of tryin' to start a aristocracy on a gun an' a wagon 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 callous aristocracy which 'as sold itself to the 'Ebrew financier. Meantime, Ducky"--he ran his finger down a column of assorted paragraphs--"you're slakin' your brutal instincks in furious excesses. Shriekin' women an' desolated 'omesteads is what you enjoy, Alf ..., Halloa! What's a smokin' 'ektacomb?"

"'Ere! Let's look. 'Aven't seen a proper spicy paper for a year. Good old Jerrold's!" Pinewood and Moppet, 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 unedicated 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."

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

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

"Well, I ain't goin' to amuse my prisoner alone. 'E's gettin' 'omesick," cried Copper. "One of you thieves read out what's vexin' Old Barbarity an' 'is 'arem these days. You'd better listen, Burjer, because, afterwards, I'm goin' to fall out an' perpetrate those nameless barbarities all over you 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 toiled 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 compliments, till Pinewood had entirely finished the leading article, and several occasional notes.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said Alf Copper, hitching up what war had left 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 and only cap-ture, an' I'm goin' to walk 'ome with 'im, ain't I, Ducky? ... Fall in, Burjer. 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 'urt you."

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

"Quit that," said the Serjeant 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 nefarious
Wildly barbarious
Beggar that kept 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 the same captain said 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 beneath his blanket. "I ain't a member of the Soldier's Institoot. Go an' look in the reg'mental Readin'-room--Veldt Row, Kopje Street, second turnin' to the left between 'ere an' Naauwport."

Jenkins summarised briefly in a tense whisper the thing that Alf Copper need not be.

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

"I've got all you want," said Jenkins. "'Urry 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."

## STEAM TACTICS

## THE NECESSITARIAN

I know not in whose hands are laid
To empty upon earth
From unsuspected ambuscade
The very Urns of Mirth:

Who bids the Heavenly Lark arise
And cheer our solemn round--
The Jest beheld with streaming eyes
And grovellings on the ground;

Who joins the flats of Time and Chance
Behind the prey preferred,
And thrones on Shrieking Circumstance
The Sacredly Absurd,

Till Laughter, voiceless through excess.