

A GERM-DESTROYER

by Rudyard Kipling

Pleasant it is for the Little Tin Gods
When great Jove nods;
But Little Tin Gods make their little mistakes
In missing the hour when great Jove wakes.

As a general rule, it is inexpedient to meddle with questions of State in a land where men are highly paid to work them out for you. This tale is a justifiable exception.

Once in every five years, as you know, we indent for a new Viceroy; and each Viceroy imports, with the rest of his baggage, a Private Secretary, who may or may not be the real Viceroy, just as Fate ordains. Fate looks after the Indian Empire because it is so big and so helpless.

There was a Viceroy once, who brought out with him a turbulent Private Secretary- a hard man with a soft manner and a morbid passion for work. This Secretary was called Wonder- John Fennil Wonder. The Viceroy possessed no name- nothing but a string of counties and two-thirds of the alphabet after them. He said, in confidence, that he was the electro-plated figure-head of a golden administration, and he watched in a dreamy, amused way Wonder's attempts to draw matters which were entirely outside his province into his own hands. 'When we are all cherubims together,' said His Excellency once, 'my dear, good friend Wonder will head the conspiracy for plucking out Gabriel's tail-feathers or stealing Peter's keys.

Then * I shall report him.'

* In DOS versions italicized text is enclosed in chevrons .

But, though the Viceroy did nothing to check Wonder's officiousness, other people said unpleasant things. Maybe the Members of Council began it; but, finally, all Simla agreed that there was 'too much Wonder, and too little Viceroy' in that rule. Wonder was always quoting 'His Excellency.' It was 'His Excellency this,' 'His Excellency that,' 'In the opinion of His Excellency,' and so on. The Viceroy smiled; but he did not heed. He said that, so long as his old men squabbled with his 'dear, good Wonder,' they might be induced to leave the Immemorial East in peace.

'No wise man has a Policy,' said the Viceroy. 'A Policy is the blackmail levied on the Fool by the Unforeseen. I am not the former, and I do not believe in the latter.'

I do not quite see what this means, unless it refers to an Insurance Policy. Perhaps it was the Viceroy's way of saying, 'Lie low.'

That season, came up to Simla one of these crazy people with only a single idea. These are the men who make things move; but they are

not nice to talk to. This man's name was Mellish, and he had lived for fifteen years on land of his own, in Lower Bengal, studying cholera. He held that cholera was a germ that propagated itself as it flew through a muggy atmosphere; and stuck in the branches of trees like a wool-flake. The germ could be rendered sterile, he said, by 'Mellish's Own Invincible Fumigatory'- a heavy violent-black powder-'the result of fifteen years' scientific investigation, Sir!'

Inventors seem very much alike as a caste. They talk loudly, especially about 'conspiracies of monopolists'; they beat upon the table with their fists; and they secrete fragments of their inventions about their persons.

Mellish said that there was a Medical 'Ring' at Simla, headed by the Surgeon-General, who was in league, apparently, with all the Hospital Assistants in the Empire. I forget exactly how he proved it, but it had something to do with 'skulking up to the Hills'; and what Mellish wanted was the independent evidence of the Viceroy-'Steward of Her Majesty the Queen, Sir.' So Mellish went up to Simla, with eighty-four pounds of Fumigatory in his trunk, to speak to the Viceroy and to show him the merits of the invention.

But it is easier to see a Viceroy than to talk to him, unless you chance to be as important as Mellishe of Madras. He was a six-thousand-rupee man, so great that his daughters never 'married.' They 'contracted alliances.' He himself was not paid. He 'received emoluments,' and his journeys about the country were 'tours of observation.' His business was to stir up the people in Madras with a long pole- as you stir up tench in a pond- and the people had to come up out of their comfortable old ways and gasp- 'This is Enlightenment and Progress. Isn't it fine!' Then they gave Mellishe statues and jasmine garlands, in the hope of getting rid of him.

Mellishe came up to Simla 'to confer with the Viceroy.' That was one of his perquisites. The Viceroy knew nothing of Mellishe except that he was 'one of those middle-class deities who seem necessary to the spiritual comfort of this Paradise of the Middle-classes,' and that, in all probability, he had 'suggested, designed, founded, and endowed all the public institutions in Madras.' Which proves that His Excellency, though dreamy, had experience of the ways of six-thousand-rupee men.

Mellishe's name was E. Mellishe, and Mellish's was E. S. Mellish, and they were both staying at the same hotel, and the Fate that looks after the Indian Empire ordained that Wonder should blunder and drop the final 'e'; that the Chaprassi should help him, and that the note which ran:-

DEAR MR. MELLISH,- Can you set aside your other engagements, and lunch with us at two to-morrow? His Excellency has an hour at your disposal then,

should be given to Mellish with the Fumigatory. He nearly wept

with pride and delight, and at the appointed hour cantered to Peterhoff, a big paper-bag full of the Fumigatory in his coat-tail pockets. He had his chance, and he meant to make the most of it. Mellishe of Madras had been so portentously solemn about his 'conference,' that Wonder had arranged for a private tiffin,- no A.-D.-C.'s, no Wonder, no one but the Viceroy, who said plaintively that he feared being left alone with unmuzzled autocrats like the great Mellishe of Madras.

But his guest did not bore the Viceroy. On the contrary, he amused him. Mellish was nervously anxious to go straight to his Fumigatory, and talked at random until tiffin was over and His Excellency asked him to smoke. The Viceroy was pleased with Mellish because he did not talk 'shop.'

As soon as the cheroots were lit, Mellish spoke like a man; beginning with his cholera-theory, reviewing his fifteen years' 'scientific labours,' the machinations of the 'Simla Ring,' and the excellence of his Fumigatory, while the Viceroy watched him between half-shut eyes and thought- 'Evidently this is the wrong tiger; but it is an original animal.' Mellish's hair was standing on end with excitement, and he stammered. He began groping in his coat-tails and, before the Viceroy knew what was about to happen, he had tipped a bagful of his powder into the big silver ash-tray.

'J-j-judge for yourself, Sir,' said Mellish. 'Y' Excellency shall judge for yourself! Absolutely infallible, on my honour.'

He plunged the lighted end of his cigar into the powder, which began to smoke like a volcano, and send up fat, greasy wreaths of copper-coloured smoke. In five seconds the room was filled with a most pungent and sickening stench- a reek that took fierce hold of the trap of your windpipe and shut it. The powder hissed and fizzed, and sent out blue and green sparks, and the smoke rose till you could neither see, nor breathe, nor gasp. Mellish, however, was used to it.

'Nitrate of strontia,' he shouted; 'baryta, bone-meal. Thousand cubic feet smoke per cubic inch. Not a germ could live- not a germ, Y' Excellency!'

But His Excellency had fled, and was coughing at the foot of the stairs, while all Peterhoff hummed like a hive. Red Lancers came in, and the head Chaprassi who speaks English, came in, and mace-bearers came in and ladies ran downstairs screaming 'Fire'; for the smoke was drifting through the house and oozing out of the windows, and bellying along the verandahs, and wreathing and writhing across the gardens. No one could enter the room where Mellish was lecturing on his Fumigatory, till that unspeakable powder had burnt itself out.

Then an Aide-de-Camp, who desired the V. C., rushed through the rolling clouds and hauled Mellish into the hall. The Viceroy was prostrate with laughter, and could only waggle his hands feebly at Mellish, who was shaking a fresh bagful of powder at him.

'Glorious! Glorious!' sobbed His Excellency. 'Not a germ, as you justly observe, could exist! I can swear it. A magnificent success!'

Then he laughed till the tears came, and Wonder, who had caught the real Mellishe snorting on the Mall, entered and was deeply shocked at the scene. But the Viceroy was delighted, because he saw that Wonder would presently depart. Mellish with the Fumigatory was also pleased, for he felt that he had smashed the Simla Medical 'Ring.'

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Few men could tell a story like His Excellency when he took the trouble, and his account of 'my dear, good Wonder's friend with the powder' went the round of Simla, and flippant folk made Wonder unhappy by their remarks.

But His Excellency told the tale once too often- for Wonder. As he meant to do. It was at a Seepee Picnic. Wonder was sitting just behind the Viceroy.

'And I really thought for a moment,' wound up His Excellency, 'that my dear, good Wonder had hired an assassin to clear his way to the throne!'

Every one laughed; but there was a delicate sub-tinkle in the Viceroy's tone which Wonder understood. He found that his health was giving way; and the Viceroy allowed him to go, and presented him with a flaming 'character' for use at Home among big people.

'My fault entirely,' said His Excellency, in after seasons, with a twinkle in his eye. 'My inconsistency must always have been distasteful to such a masterly man.'

THE END

