Kipling's World of Men

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"RUDDY thirsts for a man's life and a man's work," wrote Lockwood Kipling to a friend in December 1881, when his son was sixteen years old.[1] Whether that thirst was adequately quenched by a life of professional authorship seems open to question. What is certain is that manliness — a word we can hardly pronounce without embarrassment or irony or conscious archaism, but one which sprang with interesting readiness to the lips of the Victorians — is a key concept in discussing his work, and that various models of masculine society are prominent, even dominant, in his fiction. These preoccupations are insistent, on occasion even obsessively or (etymology aside) hysterically so: a source of characteristic strengths, but also of a sometimes fatal onesidedness. Critics were quicker to notice them than to be persuaded to take them at face value. As early as 1903, Max Beerbohm found something suspect in Kipling's reiterated insistence that his men are men. Beerbohm decided that what was actually offered was not manliness but "manlydom", suggested that in *The Light that Failed* "men are portrayed in an essentially feminine manner, and from an essentially feminine point of view . . . seen from the outside, or rather, not seen at all, but feverishly imagined," and offered the mischievous theory that Rudyard Kipling was the pseudonym of a lady novelist. Forty years later Lionel Trilling declared that "although [Kipling] makes much to-do about manliness, he is not manly," and Edmund Wilson attacked Kipling's betrayal of his art:

> Instead of *becoming* a man of action like Rimbaud . . . he fell into the ignominious role of the artist who prostrates his art before the achievements of soldiers and merchants, and who is always declaring the supremacy of the "doer" over the man of ideas.[2]

Wilson's intemperate language ("ignominious", "prostrates") suggests that he has gone too far; and it would be

nearer the truth to say that Kipling *celebrates* "the achievements of soldiers and merchants" — and, in the process, annexes largely unexplored areas of rich literary potential and expands his readers' horizons of knowledge and sympathy. Still, whether a source of strength or weakness or both, his preoccupation with the ideal of manliness and with the savoured circumstantiality of the man's world is clearly central.

The psychic sources of that preoccupation are not the concern of the present essay, though it is possible, as the criticism of Edmund Wilson, Randall Jarrell, and others attests, to reduce the phenomenon to a neatly formulated neurosis. (Significantly, Wilson's essay was written on the heels of his celebrated account of Dickens, and seems to embody a determination to find in Kipling's experience an equivalent for the blacking factory.) It is striking, though, that Kipling's "thirst" to grow up and to enter the world of men was accompanied by a precocity both physical and mental. Conemporaries of Kipling the schoolboy noticed the disconcerting maturity of his appearance, and photographs of that period of his life appear to display a middle-aged man unsuccessfully disguised as a youth. When Kipling published his early work, Henry James referred privately to "the infant monster of a Kipling," and wrote in a review that "he presents himself as a strangely clever youth who has stolen the formidable mask of maturity and rushes about making people jump with the deep sounds, the sportive exaggerations of tone, that issue from its painted lips." (James was not to know it, but his shrewd observation echoed one of Kipling's own most revealing memories of childhood, to be recorded nearly half a century later in his posthumously-published autobiography: when he stayed at the Burne-Jones home, he liked to "hang over the stairs and listen to the loveliest sound in the world — deep-voiced men laughing together over dinner.") When Kipling was twenty-five, W.E. Henley facetiously referred to his "works of youth" and "those of his riper years"; and when he was still in his thirties, Chesterton was to identify in his work an element of "precocious old age."[3]

For Kipling the masculine world he entered so early and so

eagerly involved community, solidarity, hierarchy, and exclusiveness, with the concomitant rituals of initiation, recognition, dressing up, and esoteric forms of communication. Most if not all of these features were to be found in that haunting archetype, the after-dinner group after the ladies had withdrawn; and among other Victorian institutions which embodied them in a highly developed state were the public school, the army, and the club, all three of which are prominent in Kipling's fiction. Certain key-words tend to recur in Kipling criticism, and some of them appeared early: *precocity,* for example; also *brutality* and *vulgarity* (both used by Robert Buchanan in 1900) and *obsession* (Beerbohm, 1903). Another common one is *knowingness* (T.S. Eliot's version, in his important essay on Kipling, is *cocky*), the essence of this quality being the insider's special and vaunted knowledge of that which remains a mystery to the excluded majority. Trilling has said that the "joy of being 'in' was Kipling's own special delight," and comments further:

> It is the emotion of a boy — he lusts for the exclusive circle, for the sect with the password. . . . To this emotion, developed not much beyond a boy's, Kipling was addicted all his life, and eventually it made him silly and a bore.[4]

To this addiction can be traced many of his literary qualities, from his fondness for technical jargon to the intricacy and obscurity of some of his plots. As a journalist in India between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four he had ample opportunity to develop and exploit his taste for the insider's role. A journalist's business, after all, consists in knowing more than others, in purveying secrets and unravelling mysteries; and his earliest fiction, the stories collected in *Plain Tales from the Hills,* exhibits the young author's knowingness at several levels. To the contemporary English reader it offered access to a whole colourful world of Anglo-Indian customs, and opens to ourselves a fascinating vanished culture: if we want to know exactly what a Noah's Ark picnic was, Kipling is the man to tell us. He relished the fact, or pseudo-fact, generally proferred with statistical backing:

> There are, to-day, only eleven men in India who possess this secret.

> . . . A land where you can buy a murder-charge, including the corpse, all complete for fifty-four rupees.
>
> . . . In six cases out of ten, a dying man calls for his mother.
>
> He was . . . the ugliest man in Asia, with two exceptions.

As my examples suggest, the habit is not unaccompanied by a self-awareness which sometimes finds expression in self-parody. Kipling's passion for facts (see also his poem "The Benefactors") must have been inherited, if we are to judge by his father's *Beast and Man in India* (1891), a mine of information on such topics as the cost of feeding a domestic elephant. But the young Kipling's self-confidence is not limited to local knowledge: there is a moral assurance in this tiro author whose characteristic narrative voice is that of the know-all or old hand. Many of the early poems, too, turn on a secret known only to a coterie (for example, "The Story of Uriah"): the stance is typically that of the journalist exposing hidden scandals.

The sub-continent, no less than Joyce's Dublin, is a place "where every one knows every one else" — a club, that is, or an outpost of the British public school — while school life is a rehearsal for running the Empire; so that we are told of one incident in *Stalky & Co.* that the boys "were learning, at the expense of a fellow-countryman, the lesson of their race, which is to put away all emotion and entrap the alien at the proper time." Westward Ho!, with its bachelor headmaster and almost exclusively celibate staff, was not only even more exclusively masculine than most public schools of the period: catering largely for the sons of soldiers and other expatriates, it was an ante-chamber to India. In one of the stories in the same volume we learn that a very young old boy of this new school has been killed "out in India"; and the last story in the collection is set there but recalls the world of school even to the extent of describing a killing through the medium of school slang. Stalky's life-and-death exploits repeat in another context his schoolboy escapades. Both school and army are of course male domains, and Beetle deplores the phenomenon of the married housemaster since "they have babies and teething and measles and all that sort of thing

right bung *in* the school; and the masters' wives give tea-parties . . . ."

The impact of Kipling's revelations of the world of soldiers and sailors in his early work is registered by a hostile critic, Robert Buchanan, in 1900 (twenty-eight years after his more celebrated "Fleshly School" attack);

> There was no glimpse anywhere [in *The Seven Seas*] of sober and self-respecting human beings — only a wild carnival of drunken, bragging, boasting Hooligans in red coats and seamen's jackets, shrieking to the sound of the banjo and applauding the English Flag.[5]

Buchanan becomes almost apoplectic on Stalky, but there is some perceptiveness in his suggestion that Kipling's boys are not like boys but "hideous little men"; moreover, his castigation of "Kiplingism" pays Kipling the unintended compliment of recognition as an original and unignorable force in literature. More recently, Michael Edwardes has said that "Kipling was, and remains, the only literary source we have for the mercenary army of the late nineteenth century," and Orwell noted the paradox that the ultra-conservative Kipling had more genuine interest in and concern for the common soldier than most "of his day or our own" who pride themselves on their liberalism.[6] As late as *Limits and Renewals* (1932) Kipling was still writing about soldiers — by then the Tommies of the Great War and its shell-shocked, neurosis-haunted survivors. In that volume "The Tie" interestingly links the worlds of school and soldiering: an army contractor who has supplied appalling food falls into the hands of the men who have had to eat it, and the profiteer is physically humiliated and punished. Quite unconvincingly, both victim and persecutors behave like schoolboys; the parenthetical "How well one remembers the attitude:" is revealing. In "The Tender Achilles" an army surgeon, suffering from war-induced nervous trouble, is tricked back into mental health by his colleagues: at the annual dinner of St. Peggotty's medical school (an all-male occasion, needless to say), "there were esoteric allusions . . . professional similes, anecdotes, nicknames, and reminiscences," and the cosy combination of intimacy and exclusiveness sums up much of the emotional quality of Kipling's fiction.

Work is a key-word for Kipling, who continually celebrates the skills and achievements of those who possess manual or technological expertise. C.S. Lewis has called him "the poet of work," and H.G. Wells recognized that one of his earliest and greatest achievements was to reclaim for literature a vast neglected area of human activity, opening his readers' eyes to "machinery and cotton waste and the under-officer and the engineer, and 'shop' as a poetic dialect,"[7] Kipling was fascinated by tools and processes and took peculiar pains to get his descriptions right, achieving authenticity not through bookish research but by on-the-spot observations and enquiries, as when he was preparing to write his account of cod-fishing in *Captains Courageous:*

> Conland took large cod and the appropriate knives with which they are prepared for the hold, and demonstrated anatomically and surgically so that I could make no mistake about treating them in print.[8]

What is striking in that short novel is that Kipling's interest is ignited much more readily by the gutting of cod than by the theme of the separation of parents and child; similarly, when they are reunited, he quits the emotional aspects of the situation with hardly a glance in order to move on to the (to him) genuinely exciting logistics of rapid transcontinental travel. Even a practical joke or schoolboy escapade is apt to involve the deploying of highly specialized skills: the hoaxer in "Dayspring Mishandled" must expend enormous pains in acquiring an expert knowledge of medieval manuscripts, and Stalky is capable of an accomplished rendering of a Devonshire dialect. Esoteric knowledge is power: the solution to a mystery in "Fairy-Kist" turns on familiarity with an obscure story by Mrs. Ewing. (Kingsley Amis surely misses the point in describing this as "a neat detective story":[9] inside the tale of mysterious death and amateur detection — with the characteristic setting of a small, exclusive male club — is a psychological study of a suspect which constitutes the real centre of interest.) For Kipling himself, to read and admire an author such as Jane Austen was to become admitted to a club, an inner circle of the knowing; his enthusiasm for Stevenson qualified him as

"Eminent Past Master R.L.S.", and *The Wrong Box* was "as the Initiated know . . . the Test Volume of that degree."[10] The facetiousness does not wholly conceal a conviction that is real enough. All Kipling's heroes are experts in some field or other, and the possession of a craft or special skill repeats, of course, the familiar pattern of initiates and excluded majority. What trades and professions, schools and clubs, hoaxes and feats of detection all have in common is the contrast between the knowledge of the insider and the outsider's ignorance.

As the title of a volume of Kipling's stories, *The Day's Work* has a certain inevitability. But one opposite of the day's work, as Carl Bodelsen has pointed out, is the night's terrors.[11] In some of the wartime and postwar stories emphasized by Bodelsen and praised by Edmund Wilson, work is an anodyne (as it was also for the Kipling who remarked, when he learned in 1915 that his son was missing in action, "I must do the work I have to do"[12]). Another opposite is wild hilarity, a release of tension often involving characters who exploit the knowledge and power of maturity while reverting to adolescent modes of behaviour. This begins as early as his first volume of stories, where there is much emphasis on practical jokes as a form of wild justice. In a typical revenge situation the victim is physically humiliated:

> We corked the whole of his face. We filled his hair with meringue-cream till it looked like a white wig. . . . We put a ham-frill round his neck . . . .[13]

As my earlier reference to "The Tie" in his final volume suggests, not much changed in forty-odd years; "Beauty Spots" in the same collection repeats the pattern.

One institution which outstandingly incorporates the desired qualities of exclusiveness, hierarchy, ceremony, initiation rites, and the rest, but which occupies a place of little importance in Kipling's work, is the Church. Edmund Wilson drew attention to his "homeless religious sense" and noted that it found a refuge in his practice of freemasonry. It is only in the later stories that freemasonry is at all prominent, but his allegiance went back to his youth in India.

In 1885 he was admitted to the Lodge "Hope and Perseverance No. 782 E.C." at Lahore; and his biographer Charles Carrington comments that

> Since first he came to India, the land of caste, in which the English *sahibs* had followed Indian custom by forming themselves into a caste as restricted as any other, he had been fascinated by the limbo that lay between and beneath caste-rules. Freemasonry was a cult for adult responsible males, a cult that transcended all castes and sects . . . In caste-ridden India, freemasonry was the only ground on which adherents of different religions could meet "on the level."

But if freemasonry transcended race, caste and sect, it was also notable for the exclusiveness of its all-male world, and Carrington later admits that Kipling must also have been attracted by its promise of "masculine self-sufficiency."[14] In later life he seems not to have attended meetings regularly, but he is reported to have been a member of the Authors' Lodge as well as a founder-member of two lodges connected with the War Graves Commission. The freemasons' brotherhood makes explicit appearances in such later stories as "A Madonna of the Trenches" and "In the Interests of the Brethren," but these are only special instances of a more general preoccupation with the male clique, for which the experience of war provided both test and bond. As a character in "Unprofessional" observes to a group of friends who have been through the war together: "We know each other fairly well. . . . We've seen each other stripped to the Ultimate Atom pretty often?" The first rule of such a group is to exclude the unqualified and the unworthy, and one way of doing this is by the use of in-group slang (my earlier quotation from "The Tender Achilles" is again relevant). There is a deep emotional commitment to the keeping of secrets, and the ultimate keeper of secrets is God — who will, nonetheless, occasionally take a favoured one into his confidence:

> "What do you suppose is the good of Research?"
> "God knows . . . Only — only it looks — sometimes — as if He were going to tell."
> "That's all we want . . . Keep your eye on Him, and if He seems inclined to split about anything, put it down." ("Unprofessional")

The last two stories referred to are from the final collection, *Limits and Renewals*, in which the recurring situations are of

hoaxes and practical jokes, mysteries and feats of detection, illnesses (Kipling was obsessed by cancer) and inspired unconventional therapies. What unites these varied situations is, once again, the contrast of the knowledge of the insider with the ignorance or helplessness of the victim and the world at large. The medium imitates the message, and the frequently enigmatic narratives of Kipling's later career are themselves defiant challenges to the reader by an artist who, God-like, holds the keys to all the mysteries and surrenders them — consents to "split" — only to those whose perseverance and attention demonstrate their merit and qualify them as Eminent Past Masters R.K. The mystification of the reader ("Mrs. Bathurst" is a relatively early and celebrated instance, "The Gardener" a later one) may have been the inadvertent result of the method Kipling called the "Higher Editing": the ruthless pruning away of the superfluous (and sometimes not only the superfluous) in narrative and style; but I think it is more likely to have been deliberate. His plots often have to be cracked like codes; his idiosyncratic and highly allusive style, a gift to the parodist and the despair of even such a highly perceptive foreign reader such as Borges, is intended to be intelligible only to those in the know — to the devotee, that is. To the rest, Kipling's dialogues, and even his narrative voices, are liable to carry the tantalizing flavour of a conversation overheard but only partially understood. Kipling, who (as W.L. Renwick put it[15]) was capable of turning an English country into a cult, also tried to make an exclusive club of his own readers. It is not surprising that the Kipling Society flourishes and has published its own journal since 1927.

It is entirely appropriate, too, that the *Jungle Book* should have been adopted as the Bible of the junior branch of the Boy Scout movement, itself an outstanding institutionalization of masculine exclusiveness designed for the young. In accounting for the wide juvenile appeal of that book, Trilling notes that it presents a "world peopled by wonderful parents," but that "the fathers were far more numerous than the mothers"; *Kim* too, he adds, is "full of wonderful fathers.'

There is, in fact, a general shortage of women in Kipling's work, and an even more acute shortage of fully-developed male-female relationships. As the *Times Literary Supplement* felt bound to recognize in an obituary article, in Kipling's fiction "the love of the sexes plays a very much smaller part than with most writers."[16] The absence of major women characters from *Kim* or *Captains Courageous* need surprise us no more than their absence from *Heart of Darkness* or *The Nigger of the "Narcissus":* the world of masculine activities is as legitimate a sphere for the novelist as the world of marrying and giving in marriage. A more significant case is *The Light that Failed,* in which Beerbohm (an anti-Kiplingite) found "cheap cynicism about the female sex" and which Carrington (an arch-Kiplingite) describes as "an anti-feminist tract." In many scenes of this novel there is an exaggerated male chumminess and an ostentatious use of the traditional appurtenances of masculinity, such as tobacco: "Torpenhow handed him a filled pipe, and he smoked as men smoke who for three weeks have been deprived of good tobacco. 'Ouf!' said he. 'That's heavenly . . . .' " Male society is especially needful as a compensation for the inanities of female company:" Dick went whistling to his chambers with a strong yearning for some man-talk and tobacco after his first experience of an entire day spent in the society of a woman." The trouble with women, it seems, is that they are incapable of being serious about work: "A woman will forgive the man who has ruined her life's work so long as he gives her love: a man may forgive those who ruin the love of his life, but he will never forgive the destruction of his work." The poem "The Puzzler" contrasts men of action with the "long-haired things" of literary London who "moo and coo *with womenfolk*/ About their blessed souls" (my italics). It is a curiously philistine poem, expressive of painfully crude attitudes, but it is representative of a recurring strand in Kipling's thought: the association of women with the unmanly, and the implication that it is only in a world without women that worthwhile things can be accomplished, are characteristic.

As *The Light that Failed* again illustrates, work creates a

bond stronger than that created by sexual feelings, a deep attachment for which "love" is the only possible word: "Torpenhow . . . looked at Dick with his eyes full of the austere love that springs up between men who have tugged at the same oar together and are yoked by custom and use and the intimacies of toil." The most tender moment in the novel occurs when Dick is delirious and Torpenhow kisses him "as men do sometimes kiss a wounded comrade in the hour of death." Mark Kinkead-Weekes has suggested that behind these attitudes are the pressures of Kipling's personal life in 1890, and has pointed out that his letters to Henley written at the same period are "full of hostility to women and marriage." Kinkead-Weekes finds in this novel "a bitter contempt for women and their love,"[17] and it is hard to disagree. For one of Kipling's most energetic depreciators, however, the unsatisfactoriness in his handling of women characters is more pervasive. "On the whole," wrote Boris Ford in a *Scrutiny* essay of 1942, "Kipling despised women; but in one or two tales he is glad to use them to vent feelings that he would be ashamed to attribute to a man, and above all to describe as being possible to himself,"[18] I should want to add that Kipling is prepared to find women most interesting when they are furthest from the feminine stereotypes of late-Victorian England (stereotypes which did not, of course, die with Victoria). The heroine of "William the Conqueror" imitates male virtues even to the possession of a man's name; Mrs. Bathurst is a distinctly unconventional as well as a finally enigmatic figure; "Mary Postgate" is a remarkable study in passionate revenge; the most promising title, "The Woman in his Life" turns out to refer to a dog. But for every memorable female character there are several who are insipid or worse. The prevailing attitude is typified by "The Finest Story in the World," where the hero's inspiration — his distinctive gift — fades when he finds a girl. As J. I. M. Stewart notes, the conclusion of the early "Story of the Gadsbys," that "a good man married is a good man marred," anticipates much in Kipling's later work.[19]

Personal deficiences, it is as well to add, are not necessarily

in question. Kipling's misogyny seems to have been of a different order from that of, say, A. E. Housman: he was, so far as one can judge, a devoted family man, as nearly above reproach in his relationships with his mother, sister, wife and daughters as the best of us. But like that most taciturn of Browning's monologuists, the male chauvinist hero of "Parting at Morning," he seems to have felt "the need of a world of men," that world constituting for him the arena of life's real business and its fullest satisfactions. As a writer, he presents a world which depicts half of humanity only intermittently, and then usually inadequately; and the limitations of his field of vision are inevitably damaging and connect with his failure as a novelist (*Kim* being the exception that proves the rule). In addition, as some of my examples have suggested, his presentation of the male world is itself subject to certain severe (Arnold Bennett's word is "implacable") restrictions: the exaltation of the man of action above the thinker or artist, for example, leads him into indefensible positions and crude oversimplifications. It is interesting that Angus Wilson's recent study makes the point that Kipling "rightly thought that his great distinction from most other (certainly English) writers of genius was this close relation to the world of action" only to note a few pages later that "for so clever a man, he was abnormally suspicious of 'clever' people. There is an element of grudge and of fear in his attitude."[20] Carrington points out that, at Kipling's funeral in Westminster Abbey, the congregation consisted of "men of action, the men with whom he had spent his life, rather than men of letters"; the pall-bearers included "the Prime Minister, an Admiral, a General, the Master of a Cambridge College."[21] The posthumous bias was appropriate, but surely regrettable.

NOTES

[1]Charles Carrington, *Rudyard Kipling, his life and work* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 37.

[2]Max Beerbohm, "Kipling's Entire," *Saturday Review*, 95 (1903), 198-9; Lionel Trilling, "Kipling", in Elliot L. Gilbert (ed.), *Kipling and the Critics* (New York: New York University Press 1965), p. 95 (Trilling's essay was originally published in 1943 and reprinted in *The Liberal Imagination* in 1949); Edmund Wilson, "The Kipling that Nobody Read," in Andrew Rutherford (ed.), *Kipling's Mind and Art* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p. 49 (Wilson's essay originally appeared in 1941 and was reprinted in *The Wound and the Bow* (1947)).

[3]R. L. Green (ed.), *Kipling: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 67, 160; Kipling, *Something of Myself* (London: MacMillan, 1937), p. 13; *Kipling: the Critical Heritage*, pp. 55, 273.

[4]Gilbert, p. 90.

[5]Robert Buchanan, "The Voice of 'The Hooligan'," *Contemporary Review*, 76 (1899), 781; Michael Edwardes, in John Gross (ed.), *Rudyard Kipling: the man, his work and his world* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), p. 44.

[6]George Orwell, "Rudyard Kipling," *Horizon*, 5 (1942), 118; reprinted in revised form in *Dickens, Dali and Others* (1945) and in Gilbert's collection.

[7]C. S. Lewis, "Kipling's World," in *They Asked for a Paper* (London: G. Bles, 1962) and in Gilbert's collection (originally published in the *Kipling Journal* in 1948); *Kipling: the Critical Heritage*, p. 304. Arnold Bennett, on the other hand, referred to "With the Night Mail" as "a glittering essay in the sham-technical" (in his review of *Actions and Reactions* in *New Age*, 6 (n.s.) (4 November 1909), 14-15) — a comment echoed by Boris Ford in more general terms in "A Case for Kipling?" (*Scrutiny*, 11 (1942), 30).

[8]*Something of Myself*, p. 130.

[9]Kingsley Amis, *Rudyard Kipling and his world* (New York: Scribner, 1975), p. 104.

[10]*Something of Myself*, pp. 100-101.

[11]Carl Bodelsen, *Aspects of Kipling's Art* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), p. 14.

[12]V. Milner, "Mrs. Rudyard Kipling," *National Review*, 114 (1940), p. 229.

[13]*Plain Tales from the Hills* (London, 1965), p. 275.

[14]Carrington, pp. 69, 470.

[15]W. L. Renwick, "Re-reading Kipling," in Rutherford, p. 11.

[16]*Kipling: the Critical Heritage*, p. 386.

[17]Rutherford, p. 197.

[18]Ford, p. 32.

[19]J. I. M. Stewart, *Eight Modern Writers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 256.

[20]Angus Wilson, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977), pp. 39, 46.

[21]Carrington, p. 506.