

A NEW INDICTMENT OF KIPLING'S "POETIC VULGARITY"

Robert Lynd Thinks His
Imperialism Is a Pretty
Narrow-Minded Thing

HOW unsatisfactory the entertaining "book review" becomes when captured between the covers of a book is sharply indicated in the new collection of Robert Lynd's essays "Old and New Masters" (Scribners). It is impossible to regard them, declares the *London Times*, as anything more than literary journalism: the reader is conscious in many cases that what primarily moved Mr. Lynd's pen was not a master, but somebody's book about a master. Nevertheless the book abounds in not a few apt and stimulating remarks and admirable verdicts, never of counsel's pleadings nor of scientific analyses. Mr. Lynd is most entertaining in attack rather than in appreciation. The example of this that has attracted most widespread attention is a corrosive attack on Rudyard Kipling's poetic imperialism. Of Kipling the storyteller we read: He bluffed us with his cocksure way of talking about things, and by addressing us in a mysterious jargon which we regarded as proof of his intimacy with the barrack-room, the engine-room, the race-course, and with the lives of generals, Hindus, artists and East-enders. That was Mr. Kipling's trick. . . . He compelled us to believe him by describing with elaborate detail the setting of his story.

"Mr. Kipling is an anarchist in his preferences to a degree that no bench of bishops could approve. He is, within limits, on the side of the Ishmaelites—the bad boys of his school, the 'rips' of the regiment. His books are the praise of the Ishmaelitish life in a world of law and order. They are seldom the praise of a law and order life in a world of law and order. Mr. Kipling demands only one loyalty (beyond mutual loyalty) from his characters. His schoolboys may break every rule in the place, provided that somewhere deep down in their hearts they are loyal to the 'Head.' His pet soldiers may steal dogs or get drunk, or behave brutally to their heart's content, on condition that they cherish a sentimental affection for the Colonel. Critics used to explain this aspect of Mr. Kipling's work by saying that he likes to show the heart of good in things evil. But that is not really a characteristic of his work. What he is most interested in is neither good nor evil but simple roguery. As an artist, he is a born rebel and lover of mischief. As a politician he is on the side of the judges and the lawyers. It was his politics and not his art that ultimately made

him the idol of the genteel world."

Mr. Lynd characterizes Kipling as "the poet of life with a capital Hell." Kipling was once a modern. He might have been described as a post-Imperialist. "Raucous and young, he had left behind him the ornate imperialism of Disraeli on the one hand, and the cultured imperialism of Tennyson on the other." Hitherto they had been building up the empire decently and in order. No doubt many reprehensible things were being done, but they were being done quietly. Outwardly, so far as possible, a respectable front was preserved. But Mr. Kipling changed all that:

"It was Mr. Kipling's distinction to tear off the mask of imperialism as a needless and irritating encumbrance; he had too much sense of reality—too much humor, indeed—to want to portray empire-builders as a company of plaster saints. Like an *enfant terrible*, he was ready to proclaim aloud a host of things which had, until then, been kept as decorously in the dark as the skeleton in the family cupboard. The thousand and one incidents of lust and loot, of dishonesty and brutality and drunkenness—all of those things to which builders of empire, like many other human beings, are at times prone—he never dreamed of treating as matters to be hushed up, or, apparently, indeed, to be regretted. He accepted them quite frankly as all in the day's work; there was even a suspicion of enthusiasm in the heartiness with which he referred to them. Simple old clergymen, with a sentimental vision of an imperialism that meant a chain of mission-stations (painted red) encircling the earth, suddenly found themselves called upon to sing a new psalm:—

Ow, the loot!
Bloomin' loot!
That's the thing to make the boys git up an'
shoot!
It's the same with dogs an' men,
If you'd make 'em come again.
Clap 'em forward with a Loo! Loo! Lulu! Loot!
Whoopee! Tear 'im, puppy! Loo! Loo! Lulu!
Loot! Loot! Loot!

But it was rather Mr. Kipling in his "Saturday-night mood" that first won the enthusiasm of the English young men. They loved him for his bad language, declares Mr. Lynd. His literary adaptation of the unmeasured talk of the barrack-room seemed to initiate them into a life at once more real and more adventurous than the quiet three-meals-a-day ritual of their homes. He sang of men who defied the laws of man; still more exciting, of men who defied the laws of God. The effect was that those enthusiastic readers of a decade or two ago were taught to take a strange, heretical delight in hell and damnation. "One even wrote bad verses oneself in those days, in which one loved to picture oneself as 'Cursed with the curse of Reuben, Seared with the brand of Cain.' tho so far one's most

desperate adventure into reality had been the consumption of a small claret hot, with a slice of lemon in it, in a back-street public-house."

The worst of Rudyard Kipling is that he is not only omniscient; he is knowing. He mistakes, asserts Robert Lynd, knowingness for knowledge. "He even mistakes it for wisdom at times, as when he writes, not of ships, but of women. His knowing attitude to women makes some of his verse—not much, to be quite fair—absolutely detestable." "The Ladies," for this critic, is "the vulgarest poem written by a man of genius in our time":

"As one reads it, one feels how right Oscar Wilde was when he said that Mr. Kipling had seen many strange things through keyholes. . . . And, similarly, his imperialism is a mean and miserable thing because it is the result of a keyhole view of humanity. Spiritually, Mr. Kipling may be said to have seen thousands of miles and thousands of places through keyholes. In him, wide wanderings have produced a narrow mind, and an empire has become as petty a thing as the hoard in a miser's garret."

