

V A N I T Y F A I R

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Mr. Rudyard Kipling in Perspective

*A Prophecy that the Knife-Edge of Mr. Kipling's
Prose Will Survive both His Politics and His Poetry*

By PHILIP GUEDALLA

THERE is, there was always a certain remoteness about Mr. Rudyard Kipling. His imagination played perpetually round the ends of the earth. His earliest works were imported in blue-gray paper covers from Allahabad. Even his name came from Staffordshire. He specialized in the outer edges of Mercator's Projection, in Lungtungpen and Mandalay and those miraculous regions east of Suez where Queen Victoria's writ ran a trifle uncertainly. He even went so far afield (it was an incredible achievement in the heyday of Mrs. Humphry Ward) as to have an American public. In a generation which regarded stories of Scottish life as travellers' tales from the far North he extended the public imagination to broad and distant horizons, and, taking whole degrees of latitude in his stride, he jerked a familiar thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the Equator, a Pole or so, and all the uncomfortable wonders of the world which lie outside the Temperate Zone. It became his mission to convince his fellow-subjects that the British Empire was an ideal and not merely an accident, and that the oddly dressed equestrians with dark faces who rode in the cavalcade of Queen Victoria's second Jubilee possessed a significance beyond that normally attributed to them by the proprietors of circuses. It was a high theme, which took him up and down the map, and even into agreement with Mr. Joseph Chamberlain.

Mr. Kipling and the Dinosaur

BUT his remoteness in place was more than equalled by his remoteness, as one looks at him now, in point of time. The Dinosaur, one feels, can give points in modernity to Mr. Kipling. After all it is on speaking terms with Mr. H. G. Wells. But the author of *Soldiers Three* seems to belong to an age of almost fabulous antiquity. His flag, his Queen, his soldiers are the vague figures of a mythology that is rapidly fading into folklore. His political message has a dim interest for research students. And patient excavation will, no doubt, confirm many of the statements that are to be found in his text.

The old, flamboyant Anglo-Saxon challenge to the inferior peoples of the earth went under, long before Mr. Kipling had a gray hair, in the dreary watches of the South African War. It was seen in that dismal winter of 1899 that the dashing subaltern of his dreams was not even an infallible master of his own profession. It was feared that the British soldier was even capable of being on the wrong side. There was no place in Mr. Kipling's scheme for Louis Botha and Jan Smuts. The Imperial ideal wilted through the long years between the Peace of Vereeniging and the outbreak in 1914 of a life-size war. The White Man grew more interested in his own highly complicated affairs than in his Burden; and gradually British opinion came to regard a Labor leader as a more important person than a retired proconsul. It was, for Lord Curzon, Lord Milner, and Lord Cromer as well as for Mr. Kipling, an embittering interlude.

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Then, as they say in novels when the author feels an acute need for a change of scene, the war came; and when it went it left behind it a dismal world groping for some cohesion among the broken pieces, snatching hungrily at any fragments of common organization, but profoundly unfriendly to the old, self-seeking gesture which had painted the map red. Perhaps the map seemed quite red enough after the war. Three Empires had been hissed off the stage, and there was a sharp drop in Imperial quotations on the world market. The old ideals were looking a little guilty, even when they spoke perfect English; and there was an uneasy suspicion that the gleam which Mr. Kipling had followed was the silver gleam of an eagle perched on an old man's helmet among the trees at Doorn.

Mr. Kipling's Kingdom

BUT, as one turns the page and passes into Mr. Kipling's kingdom, one is centuries away from the pale uncertainties, the dingy, poor-spirited doubts of the world we live in. The Queen is on her throne again at Windsor; her sentries pace up and down the world; and the secrets of the universe fall open at the command of a cocksure young man in spectacles with a large moustache, "a strangely clever youth", as a startled commentator observed him, "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."

There is something which must remind one of Gulliver among the largest and most majestic of his hosts in the spectacle of Mr. Henry James turning that solemn microscope on Mr. Kipling. Yet the criticism (it is in a forgotten preface of an obscure American volume) contains the wisest enumeration of Mr. Kipling's qualities. "His extreme youth is indeed what I may call his window-bar—the support on which he somewhat rowdily leans while he looks down at the human scene with his pipe in his teeth; just as his other conditions (to mention only some of them) are his prodigious facility, which is only less remarkable than his stiff selection; his unabashed temperament, his flexible talent, his smoking-room manner, his familiar friendship with India—established so rapidly, and so completely under his control; his delight in battle, his 'cheek' about women—and indeed about men and about everything; his determination not to be duped, his 'imperial' fiber, his love of the inside view, the private soldier, and the primitive man." The whole of Mr. Kipling is to be found somewhere along the branches of that ramifying sentence. It has been written more than thirty years, and in the interval his familiarity with India has taken in another continent or so; the flexible talent has been bent to verse, to prophecy, to ancient history, to the elusive pursuit of English landscape; and the prodigious facility, alas! has run dry. But the smoking-room manner, the love of the inside view, remained constant; and criticism, through the mouth of Mr. Henry James in 1891, has said its last word on Mr. Kipling.

Technically, of course, his achievement has been astounding. He handled the foils in the short story with unparalleled skill; and as a stylist he enlarged the limits of the English language with all the gusto of an Empire-builder planting the flag in undiscovered regions. But not all his conquests (one has noticed the same weakness among Empire-builders) were of equal value. His contribution to the poetic vocabulary seemed princi-

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simple litany of the blaspheming soldier, and the deeper tone of the Authorized Version (O. T.). By persons unfamiliar with the original Mr. Kipling is frequently admired for qualities which should be attributed with greater accuracy to the Jacobean translator of the Book of Psalms. But as a poet one feels that he found the English language marble and left it stucco. As building material it is at once cheaper to get and easier to handle; and his introduction of it on the market has brought poetic composition within the means of persons who should never have been able to afford a Rhyming Dictionary. His imitators are the gravest wrong which Mr. Kipling has inflicted upon his country's literature.

But his contribution to English prose is more serious. That instrument, since English falls naturally into poetry just as French falls into prose and German into ballads, is perhaps the most difficult to play upon in the whole range of language. Mr. Kipling played on his instrument with queer, *staccato* jerks and sudden discords. There were new notes in it which shocked the old concert-goers, and to some hearers the music seems sometimes to degenerate into mere noise. But his touch was astonishingly sure, and he played on the English language an air which had never been heard before. One may say that under his hand the instrument of prose lost some of its deeper notes, grew shriller, often trailed away into discord. But it rendered strange airs which could never have come over the old strings, and Mr. Kipling left it the richer and the better for his innovations.

Seascapes and Sunlight

IT is easy enough to find his stale politics ridiculous, or to see, with Mr. Beerbohm, an ineluctable vulgarity in the perpetual knowingness of his unchanging wink. But Mr. Kipling, in his true perspective, is something more than a warning to young poets or a monument of late-Victorian Imperialism. He sharpened the English language to a knife-edge, and with it he has cut brilliant patterns on the surface of our prose literature. At least two of the best stories in the world are somewhere behind that short line of red book-backs; and scattered up and down inside the books are scores of vivid little etchings, fit for a place in any portfolio—blazing sunlight, some seascapes of the North Atlantic, frontier fighting, a dozen men, some women, and one doleful little boy. He has made his contribution to letters; and one day, when the new voices are less insistent and through a silence we can catch his strange, halting tones, it will be remembered.

