

A CHAT WITH RUDYARD KIPLING

CYRIL CLEMENS

"YOU'RE just in time for tea. Unfortunately my wife is away at present, so it will be only you and me," said Rudyard Kipling as he stood at his front-door with hand outstretched to welcome me. I will always remember the author's ancient brick home, named "Bateman's", protected by a high thick hedge from the nearby, white-surfaced roadway. Equally unforgettable was Kipling with his bald head, heavy eyebrows, and friendly quiet smile.

Over delicious scones, buttered toast, and fragrant China tea, my host was soon recalling his first visit to America away back in the year 1889, and his stop-off at Elmira, New York, where Mark Twain was summering.

"I was determined to meet the great American whose *Roughing It*, *Innocents Abroad* and *Tom Sawyer* had given me such keen pleasure. So after sending in my card,

RUDYARD KIPLING
ALLAHABAD

I was admitted to a big, darkened room, a huge chair, a man with large luminous eyes, a brown moustache, a strong, square hand shaking mine, and the slowest, calmest, levellest voice in all the world, saying:

"Well, you think you owe me something, and you've come all the way from India to tell me so. That is what I call squaring a debt handsomely!"

At first Kipling felt he was meeting an elderly man, but within a very few minutes he "knew otherwise and perceived how youthful were the eyes looking at me and that the grey hair was merely a trivial accident". "He was really and essentially quite young. Reading his books in distant India, I had endeavored to get an idea of his personality, but all preconceived notions proved erroneous. No illusion whatsoever awaited me in being brought face to face with my favorite author."

"The first thing we discussed was the copyright question. I told Clemens that I had just received a letter from Grant Allen, which said:

Use your personal influence in favor of international copyright, and prevent the organized robbery of English authors

by the American people. Work like mine brings me in a bare pittance in England; the only reading public that cares for it—the American—steals it and pays the author nothing!

"After Mark had talked a good deal about copyright, I asked:

"'You feel then that all the world has no commercial sense? But the book that will live forever can't be artificially kept up at inflated prices. There will always be very expensive editions of it, and cheap ones issuing side by side.'"

'I remember one unprincipled publisher,' continued Mark. 'He used to take my short stories—I can't call it steal or pirate them. It was beyond these things altogether. He took my stories one at a time and made a book of it. If I wrote an essay on dentistry, orthoepy, or any little thing of that kind—that publisher would amend and improve my essay. He would then get another man to write some more to it, or cut it about exactly as his needs required. Then he would publish a book called *Dentistry, by Mark Twain*, that little essay and some other things not mine added. Theology would make another book, and so on. I do not think that fair. It's an insult. But he's dead now. I didn't kill him.'

"I then asked Twain some questions about his books, and wanted to know whether Tom Sawyer married Judge Thatcher's daughter, and whether we were ever going to hear of Tom Sawyer as a man."

"'I haven't decided,' returned Mark. 'I have thought of writing the sequel to *Tom Sawyer* in two ways. In one I would make him rise to great honor and go to Congress, and in the other I should hang him. Then the friends and enemies of the book could take their choice.'"

Kipling said that when he objected to any such theory as this, because to him and to hundreds of thousands of others Tom was real, Mark continued:

"'Oh, he is real, very real to me also. He's all the boy that I have known or recollect; but that alternative will probably never present itself, as I do not expect to take Tom into manhood.'"

When I mentioned that I had recently enjoyed a pleasant conversation with Marconi in Rome, Kipling said:

"In 1899, when Mrs. Kipling and I were living at The Elms, Rottingdean, our friend Mr. H. H. McClure wrote asking if he could bring Marconi to see us. They graciously accepted my

invitation to lunch at one o'clock. I got Marconi to talk about wireless, and at the end of an hour I felt that I knew as much about wireless as it was possible for a layman to learn. During the talk I consciously or unconsciously was gathering much material for my story, *Wireless*, in which I carried the idea of etheric vibrations into the possibilities of thought transference."

Although he was much too modest to say so, it was evident that Kipling had remembered every word that Marconi had spoken during his long and rather complicated exposition, and that his story reflected all the exact technicalities required.

Speaking of truth and the like in literature, Mark declared that an autobiography was the one work in which a man, against his own will and in spite of his utmost striving to the contrary, revealed himself in his true light to the world.

"A good deal of your life on the Mississippi is autobiographical, isn't it," Kipling asked.

"As near as it can be," replied Mark, "when a man is writing a book about himself. But in genuine autobiography I believe it is impossible for a man to tell the truth about himself or to avoid impressing the reader with the truth about himself. I made an experiment once. I got a friend of mine—a man painfully given to speak the truth on all occasions—a man who wouldn't dream a lie—and I made him write his autobiography for his own amusement and mine. He did it. The manuscript would have made an octavo volume, but—good, honest man that he was—in every detail of his life that I knew about, he turned out on paper a most formidable liar. He simply couldn't help himself!"

As Mark got up from his chair and began strolling up and down the room, he continued:

"I do not believe that it is in human nature to write the truth about itself. None the less, the reader usually gets a general impression from an autobiography whether the writer is a fraud or a good man. The reader can't give his reasons, any more than a man can explain why a woman struck him as being lovely when he doesn't remember her hair, eyes, teeth, or figure. And the impression that the reader gets is the correct one."

Asked if he ever intended writing an autobiography, Mark drew hard on his pipe, threw up a cloud of smoke and drawled:

"If ever I write an autobiography, it will probably be as other men have done—with the most earnest desire to make myself out to be the better man in every little business that has been to my discredit; and I shall fail, like the others, to make my readers believe anything except the truth."

After we had discussed Mark Twain, I asked Kipling if he had known any other American humorists.

"I went to Canada in 1907," he answered, "making the trip through to Vancouver without visiting the United States, but I spent two days with Finley Peter Dunne in Montreal, and enjoyed the visit tremendously. We found in each other absolutely congenial spirits. Whenever possible I slipped away from the numerous receptions and entertainments, and retired to Dunne's sitting room, where we spent hours in swapping one story after another. Since *Mr. Dooley in Peace and War* had first appeared in 1898, I had been a warm admirer of Dunne's work. His *Mr. Dooley* possessed wit, a bold imagination, a sharp tongue, a wide sympathy, and a rare fund of common sense. Who can ever forget his delightful Irishisms?

"'There's no intoxicant in th' wurruld, Hinmissy, like money. It goes to th' head quieker th' whiskey th' druggist makes in his back room;

"'Some iv th' boldest liars I iver met wud've been thruthful men if they'd dared to be;

"'Onaisy, as Hogan says, is th' head that wears a crown. There is other heads that're onaisy too; but ye don't hear iv them.'"

When our talk had wandered from humorists to the game of golf, Kipling vividly described an odd golf game he had played during the winter of 1893 when he was living in the home he had built at Brattleboro, New Hampshire.

"We played the game over snow several feet deep, upon the crust, cutting holes into the soft snow, and naturally losing the balls until it occurred to my partner to ink them red. The first day we experimented with them, we dyed the plain like some football gridiron; then we had them painted. The trouble with golfing on the crust was that as the meadow was upon a side hill with gradual slope, a ball went on forever when once started unless headed off by some kindly stone wall or by one's opponent. It was not at all difficult to make a drive of one or two miles! As spring arrived, little putting greens emerged

like oases in the snow, and then we arranged holes of empty vegetable cans sunk in the moist soil, round which we would manoeuvre in rubber boots. I recall my partner's intentional miss of a hole one inch away one afternoon, throwing the victory to me who was a stroke and five yards behind."

"Did you do much writing at Brattleboro, Mr. Kipling?"

"During the four years I was there, from 1892 to 1896, I turned out the two *Jungle Books*, some of the short stories in *The Day's Work*, many of the poems in *The Seven Seas*, and *Captains Courageous*. Joel Chandler Harris's praise of the *Second Jungle Book* made me proud and happy, and I told him.

"You probably do not know how *Uncle Remus*, his sayings, and the sayings of the noble beasties ran like wild fire through *Westward Ho*, my English school, when I was about fifteen. The boys used to go to battle, with boots and bolsters, and such-like, to the tune of *Ty-yi-tungalee: I eat um pea, I pick um pea*, etc., and I recall the bodily bearing into a clump of bushes solely because his nickname had been 'Rabbit' before the tales invaded the school and—well, we assumed that he ought to have been born and bred in a briar-patch. A few years ago when I met an old schoolmate in India, we soon found ourselves quoting whole pages of *Uncle Remus* that had got inextricably mixed up with the memories of our school-days."

"Some of my most vivid memories of Vermont," continued Kipling "were of the picturesque itinerant peddlers who invaded the region each spring, hawking their merchandise from farm to farm: formidable red-and-gilt biographies of great Americans like Washington, Hamilton and Lincoln, twenty-pound family Bibles, colored steel engravings, patent electric pills, seeds, knives, needles, and flavoring extracts of infinite color and variety. One of these wandering quacks, a florist's representative hawking seeds, who had come 'to swindle every citizen from Keene to Lake Champlain, inspired my poem *Pan in Vermont*, which was first published in the *American Country Life* sometime in 1902."

Before I left, my host kindly showed me over his house and gardens, his old water mill which was rated in the Doomsday book at a shilling a year tax!—and his farm generally. The "newest" wing on his house was nearly three hundred years old. Not a few guns which fought the Spanish armada were cast on the farm during Elizabethan days, when there was an important armament foundry near the mill. I saw also the

location scenes for *Puck of Pook's Hill*, the wholly delightful fairy stories Kipling wrote for his two children Elsie and John whose loss during the First World War was such a terrific blow to the author.

Unlike my experience with some authors, meeting Kipling personally was nothing of a disappointment, and I went away reciting to myself the closing lines of *L'Envoi*:

And only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master shall
blame;
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame;
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate
star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It, for the God of Things as They
Are!