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## The Lost Paradise of Rudyard Kipling<sup>1</sup>

India, for Rudyard Kipling, represented the Lost Paradise — this is Angus Wilson's contention and central thesis in his recently published critical biography.<sup>2</sup> The contention contains two levels of meaning: Wilson is speaking of the undoubtedly blissful early years in Bombay, before the future author and his small sister were taken to England to be left abruptly and without explanation, in the "House of Desolation"; Wilson is also talking about Kipling's sense of the Wordsworthian recollection of childhood, the Romantic imagination's memory of innocence.

A profound sense of loss and sorrow pervades many of Kipling's writings. A few happy, shining tales — "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," and, in most respects, *Kim* — appear to have got hold of the Lost Paradise and restored or retained it. A considerable number of Kipling stories, however, depict India as anything but a "garden of delights," and life in general as hellish or tragic. The imperishable Jungle Books end on a note of cosmic mystery comprised of adventure and suspense, but also of doubt and despair.

It is significant that we take leave of Kipling's three main boy heroes — Mowgli, Harvey Cheyne, and Kim — at about age seventeen, the age of Kipling himself when he returned to India following his school years, ready to begin a career in journalism and obviously thinking himself to be very much a grown man. It is probably gratuitous to remark that something of Kipling is in all three fictional youths. Harvey, the least interesting of the trio, assumes manhood competently after a too-quick conversion and choice of Successful Businessman role (that the Troops, father and son, have employed wisdom and humanity in molding young Harvey's character helps to "save" Harvey — and the story).

Kim grows, but remains a boy when the book ends. He has learned (the word is chosen advisedly) to love his Lama, but his maturity is not yet equal to encompassing either the Lama's experience of joining

the world-soul or the magnitude of the Lama's sacrifice — returning with a wrench to the Wheel of Things in order to save his chela. Kim's responses to the account — "Wast thou very wet?" and "What said the Sahiba?" — are simply boyish. Kim is one of literature's great rogue-naifs (more naif than rogue) — charming, warm-hearted, pranksome, and brave. We are told by Kipling that he "had known all evil since he could speak," but nothing about him suggests that the knowledge has penetrated. It remains outside, to be used, if at all, in outwitting the internal evil of others as he masters the strategies of the Great Game. Kim is, in effect, a con-artist for the good; it does not matter that he has "learned" about evil — it is goodness that is cosmic and inborn in him. Despite his street-urchin identity, Kim still trails his clouds of glory.

Mowgli may be called the third part of Kipling. Although the jungle-reared lad has accepted (ruefully, and with his mind only) that "Man goes to Man at the last," and although he is biologically fully mature, Mowgli at the end is a tortured youth, filled with a sense of loss so keen and poignant as to be almost unbearable. Mowgli's torment is only partly due to his identity crisis: on a more profound level he suffers from his sense of the loss of Paradise.<sup>3</sup>

Other young people in Kipling's writings give us, and experience themselves, a sense of being suspended between the "real" world and an earlier, more exciting, perhaps "better" one. Dan and Una in *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies* are on the threshold of the adult world. Their Paradise is "Eternal Sussex" where their fairy friend, Puck, takes them not only to play with the "People of the Hills" but also to share the lives of persons long dead yet mysteriously alive. At the opening of *Rewards and Fairies* Dan and Una are beginning to "outgrow" Paradise. It is "their first summer in boots" (which still hurt) and those boots are put together with "cold iron." "Cold iron" is an important Kipling symbol. It stands for "folk in housen," another way of saying ordinary mortals. When Una says, "I'm growing up, you know," we realize that she and her brother will not be adventuring with Puck much longer. There is at least a touch of the Wordsworthian in the fact that brother and sister are permitted to retain only shadow memories of their magic excursions.

Kipling makes a more profound statement in a Dan-and-Una tale, "Cold Iron." Here the division between Paradise and Paradise Lost is sharply etched. A mysterious "Boy" (never given a name) has been adopted and brought up by the fairy folk "on the far side of cold iron" — remote from human beings. He, too, is about seventeen when he finds an iron ring ("planted" at the time of his birth), and, discovering that it has a lock, snaps the lock home, his fingers working as if for

Destiny. The ring is a slave ring like the one his unknown mother wore when she died giving him birth.

Once the ring is locked, the Boy must say farewell to his fairy "parents" and join "folk in housen" (to whom he has been powerfully attracted all along). "What else could I have done?" he asks, an echo of Mowgli's "Man goes to Man at the last." The Boy marries, sires a number of children, and works very hard all his life. But unlike Mowgli he does not seem to miss his world of adventure: indeed, parting from it "cures" him of his "flaming discontents." It is as if he knew all along that Paradise must be lost, and that this is fitting. On the surface Kipling sings a Blakean "Song of Experience," but only on the surface. Actually the Boy moves from one essentially innocent state into another: there is nothing cynical or sordid about the simple, human world of love, marriage, children, and toil he exchanges for the magic adventures which have never really satisfied him.

A poem, also entitled "Cold Iron," follows the story. Philip Mason<sup>4</sup> makes much of its striking Christian imagery, its indication that the "cold iron" of the nails which pierced the hands and feet of Christ on the Cross also symbolizes the redemptive power of human love. The point remains buried in the poem. The reader gets a sense of Kipling's having got hold of a powerful conception and given it a moving rendition, not a sense that Kipling used the poem to express felt beliefs. More, the poem implies the ultimate, or eschatological Paradise of Christian tenet, springing from the supreme sacrifice made by Son of God when He died for human-kind. Kipling did not employ this as a characteristic theme; his interest in Paradise was invariably in the primal, or first, Paradise — the "garden," all innocent delights, or "Eden" — an Eden of adventures that only a child's (or a childlike adult's) imagination can encompass.

The India to which Kipling returned was no Paradise. It was a land of hard work, poverty, heat, drought, fever, and death. "Natives" who practice black magic, dispense poisons at whim, cheat one another and their "Sahibs," or are weak and foolish, appear regularly in the stories Kipling now began to write, starting in about 1884. His "white" people in these same stories often fare little better. They are frequently second-raters "come out" from England who fail miserably, cowards, purveyors of hilltown gossip and intrigue, men who know too much for their own good, cruel persons of both sexes, unfaithful spouses. As Kipling moved away from India, both literally and in subject matter, coming eventually to settle in England, his stories after the turn of the century begin to be peopled with Sussex farmers or "Lunnon" types, women cruelly affected by World War I, clever men determined to

outwit fate. Only a few of his characters are entirely admirable or good, only a few of their lives are fulfilling and fulfilled.

Angus Wilson has stated that Kipling's main theme may be considered to be the breaking-down of human beings, and this does indeed supply the motif in many tales. Kipling's real theme is, of course, the relationship between people — men and women, men and men, women and women, children and grownups, adolescents with other adolescents. Break-downs (if they have them) are less important than the way in which Kipling has used these human relationships in order to explore a deeper relationship — that between human beings and what they can find and cling to of Paradise.

It seems, then, of special importance that so many Kipling stories dissect relationships charged with hate, fury, frustration or betrayal. Mary Postgate spends very little time watching the death-agonies of the fallen German airman, but in brief, telling strokes Kipling says all there is to say about the soul of Mary Postgate and its place in the scheme of things. Those who think of her as a neurotic, middle-aged spinster are mistaken: she is an avenging angel, exacting horrible punishment for Paradise Betrayed. Grace Ashcroft in "The Wish House" is probably seen by modern readers as "sick" because she has deliberately taken upon herself a horrible form of cancer as a "trade" by which she restores to health the unworthy, uncaring man whom she loves futilely. We cannot be certain whether Kipling meant us to see Grace as noble and selfless, or as a woman bent on winning her own redemption. Her very name is suggestive, but may have been used for ironic effect. Whether she knows it or not, however, Grace, by her action, has "frozen" Harry in a state of perpetual youthful health — a remembered perfection which, hardly by coincidence, is sustaining her in the terminal phase of her illness. It seems that this is as close as she can get to some form of Paradise.

Morrowbie Jukes in "The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes" becomes just like the other inhabitants of the village of the "living dead" into which he has fallen by accident — mean, tricky, inhuman. His sole interest, following the *deus-ex-machina* escape which weakens the story, is to learn the identity of another Sahib whose mummified remains still occupy one of the coffin-niches in that evil sand-trap: he has no intention of trying to locate the village and bring help to its seventy or so pitiful denizens, several of them children. The attitude has been termed one of white-Sahib heartlessness, but this early Kipling work was probably intended as a simple exercise in horror and suspense. It is, of course, easy to read in it a stark accounting for the readiness with which someone cut off from the roots of Paradise becomes dehumanized.

In a serio-comic story, "A Second-Rate Woman," the sparkling, socially influential Mrs. Hauksbee and the dowdy, naive, socially unacceptable Mrs. Delville share a moment of perfect love and understanding at the bedside of a child whose life has just been saved by the selfless devotion and unexpected competence of "the dowd." Kipling is filled with such little moments — one-to-one ties perfectly expressive of the human condition through either great love or great hate. In this case Mrs. Delville emerges as a savior figure and by her action perhaps teaches the clever Mrs. Hauksbee a lesson in compassion. Ultimately both women are involved in the safeguarding of innocence — "angels" protecting "paradise."

When Kipling writes of failures he often presents persons who have taken too much of Paradise (or of a foolish concept of Paradise) with them into life and who evidently expect others to do so as well. Excessive innocence causes Lispeth, betrayed by the pseudo-Christian English family she had loved and trusted and by the pseudo-Christian young man to whom she had given her heart, to "revert to type" and end her days a drunken crone. Naive old Suddhoo is bled white by a group of resident con-artists. Like Lispeth, his is basically a failure to understand that Paradise is indeed behind us. Conversely, Kipling characters such as Dravot and Carnehan in "The Man Who Would Be King" carry too little of Paradise with them on their earthly journey as, with their mad scheme to "create" a world (to be, ironically, an earthly Paradise), they spread chaos, corrupt a people, and bring about their own dooms.

In "The House Surgeon," the M'Leod family purchases a "perfect" house — one in which, or so they are promised, no death has ever occurred. But what was to have been a wholesome "Eden" for man, wife, and daughter, turns to hell, or anti-Paradise, when an appalling depression oozes from the walls like a fog. The narrator solves the mystery: a death begun *inside* the house ended *outside* it — and at once the curse is lifted. But the M'Leods have committed a supreme sin by denying their own mortality. Worse, they have dared to imagine that Paradise can be purchased — and is composed of such "solids" as stone, wood, or plaster. The shattering experience "redeems" them and we leave them romping through the halls of their "saved" home like happy children.

It is possible that the house in "The House Surgeon" is meant to be seen as a surrogate Paradise. Houses are extremely important in the writings of Kipling, often so described or endowed with qualities that they are characters in their own rights. Kipling literally did believe that every house has its special Feng-shui or presiding spirit, and biographers invariably note the Kiplings' frequent moves, as if Rudyard

and Carrie were in constant quest of a house with the proper Feng-shui as, in a way, they were.

"The house" (as opposed to "a house") not only stands, in Kipling, for the human condition but also for "that which enclosed" — a fence, a wall, a ring. "The magic . . . lies in the ring or fence that you take refuge in," Kipling wrote in "Something of Myself."<sup>5</sup> Kipling was not simply playing with an idea: he believed in it. He often speaks of God (or Allah) even though there is little sense of the religious (certainly of the traditionally religious) at the heart of his writings. But when he writes of magic, even superstition or fairy lore, something not only vivid but close to a sense of the divine animates a given poem or story. This can be confusing at times, especially when God (or Allah) is linked with magic, but at the base of it all Kipling is always talking about the same thing — a force, a something, that either locks Paradise in, keeps Paradise out, substitutes (at times falsely or inadequately) for Paradise, or, perhaps, tries to pervert remnants of primal innocence. The house, I believe, appears often in Kipling because it is another variant of the "ring": as such, however, it was too naively conceived to work — that is, to save and protect.

Purun Bhagat neither builds nor buys a house. He selects for shelter (since even a holy man must accept the reality of weather) an abandoned shrine, once sacred to the goddess Kali. His ring is the peaks of the high Himalayas, and, symbolically, the purity they represent. With regard to Kali, Kipling was too subtle to labor a point — she was, of course, India's goddess of death and destruction. He tells us only that the Bhagat lives with but essentially ignores her "grinning" statue. In other words, Purun Bhagat does not fence himself into Kali's world but into his own passionate adherence to The Way as followed by the righteous Hindu. His ring breaks when the outside pressure of deep human need forces it. "Good" rushes out through the break — the holy man has given up his vows when he leaves his shrine to warn the villagers of the oncoming avalanche. But what may be seen as a greater good remains — the giving of his life to save others. It is an entirely different action — and result — from what Grace Ashcroft is about when she enters (symbolically) the world of the Wish House. She is "making magic" and magic of a questionable sort when she closes herself into the twin-linked rings of death and cancer for a dubious, even a sinister, cause.

A sort of ring breaks open for the Red Lama in *Kim*. As in the tale of Purun Bhagat redemption from the purely Eastern viewpoint is probably seen as forfeited when the Lama forces himself to return to the Wheel of Things to achieve a worldly good. Actually it is not made clear in either story whether the Bhagat and the Lama move back-

wards or forwards into Paradise, or even whether they achieve it at all. And there is more than a hint of irony, perhaps despair, at the conclusion of "The Miracle of Purun Bhagat" when the name of the man who has sought self-abnegation above all else becomes permanently attached to a new shrine erected by the villagers to perpetuate his memory as an individual.

Mowgli's "Eden" is, superficially, bounded by the jungle territory allotted to the Seonee Wolf Pack. On a deeper level, it is the "ring" of wolf identity which, as long as he stays within it, prevents Mowgli from assuming his human identity. Actually, of course, the ring does not prevent Mowgli from a rather full realization of his own nature—but only his animal brothers are consistently aware that this is so. On still other levels, Mowgli's ring encloses him in a world of life-and-death adventure, and of a strange, marvellous innocence, and to him this is, although he cannot express it, Paradise. A portion of the youth's tears and fears seem simply part of adolescence, but there is a more profound explanation. When Kipling's boy heroes grow up, they do not renew their identities as innocent children: they take an adult status with its attendant loss of childlike innocence. In Mowgli's case this makes "shedding the skin" of childhood (and "animalhood") appear as an especially tragic or impossible rite of passage because the boy cannot realize that he may be gaining, in a new way, more than he is losing. When Kaa sheds his skin he is reborn and renewed in ways which transcend the merely physical but this is not the case with the "Mancub." The Eoy in "Cold Iron" is happy to become fully human, and Kim does not seem to mind that he is achieving that status (the more he becomes a man, the more he can play the Great Game). But Mowgli is deeply disturbed, as if he (and perhaps Kipling) cannot accept the fact that, although growing up does mean the loss of one sort of Paradise, it does not preclude the attainment of another kind. Mowgli clings to his ring because he can see nothing to be attained outside it, and it is this which gives him the special mystery and poignancy that Kipling's other "boys" do not possess.

Kipling felt obliged to invent his own myth to account for the fall of animalkind and by doing so he underscored the difference between what it means to be human and what it means to be animal and describes the Paradise that is available to each. The animals, "good" or "bad," accept what they are, even though it means that an original perfection was destroyed long ago and that they must now live in Nature ("red in tooth and claw" — a life which they find both inevitable, and, in a way, magnificent). Bagheera, Baloo, Kaa, the wolves and the rest do not imagine that anything can be altered, either by action or belief: their ring is, in consequence, a prison. They do not, however,

agonize over this, even when aware of it. With Mowgli matters are otherwise. It must occur to him that Hathi's tale of the long-ago lost Paradise of the animals is actually his own story and that of his kind — up to a point, and his unconscious realization of the story's implications deepens his sense of sorrow and loss.

The "tremendous secret" that narrator and reader share with the children in "They" is not simply that the children are dead even though they can be glimpsed, or sensed, or felt, especially by those who love children greatly or who have tragically lost a child. The children in the story "live" in the eternity of innocence, while the narrator and all others who have been "left behind" to grow up live in time as well as in the human condition. This is why, after having been permitted a few precious, haunting visits, the narrator is forbidden to return to the house where the children dwell (described as a place of "good influence and great peace," clearly a perfect Feng-shui). "They" is, of course, an intensely personal story. In it Rudyard Kipling takes leave of the daughter "who was all to him" while the narrator returns to the real world with grief but also with heightened understanding. What is important to the story is the primal innocence of the children, symbolized by the sound of a laugh, the pressure of lips on a hand, a flash of color or motion partly seen — the invasion of earthly sensibilities from the Heaven which is our home. "They" is a story in which Paradise is all behind us, beautiful but evanescent — pure Kipling/ Wordsworth. The fully realized human beings in the tale are not the children but the ones left behind in a world in which they have lost what they loved most. There is no way for the "survivors" to break through their particular ring and join the children, but the knowledge that the children are in their special Paradise helps fence and protect the grieving from the pain of loss.

It is not, then, India with its wealth of humanity, not even remembered India where a happy little boy spent the first six years of his life, that is Paradise for Kipling. It is, rather, a sense, sadly maintained, of a long-ago, perfect place where once a small child (many small children) lived in joy and innocence. It is the "knowledge" of a primal time before time came to be. The characters in *Kim* move through time. Mowgli, the "lost" one, lives in an oddly timeless world. Indeed, the charm of *The Jungle Books* overlaps with the charm of *Peter Pan*. Both settings are "frozen" Never-Never Lands of high adventure and eternal youth. The difference is that in *The Jungle Books* life and death are "for real," and Mowgli cannot protect himself as Peter Pan does by retaining forever his magic ring.

In a way, the world of Kipling is a world without a future. In it, if government is firm and wise, children properly reared, wars holy and



just, and law ties up all accounts, good seems to be an integral part of the human condition. But does redemption through the divine play any role in this? Does an ultimate Paradise guide or form the human purpose? Apparent purpose in Kipling's universe is, I suggest, only apparent, and his is a sad world because the best part was, not will be. This "best part" rests in an archaic time-beyond-time (it is, of course, the world of *Just So Stories*). It is enduring only in the sense that it is archetypal.

Readers of contemporary biographies of Kipling quickly gain the impression that the writer was a rather depressed person in a very fundamental way; his animating concept of the cosmos must have been born from this aspect of his personality (he had, of course, much in his life history to account for depression). It is not difficult to imagine that Kipling's own "ring" fenced him in not only with the delights and warm magic of life and remembered innocence but also with his dread of the "shadow of ancient regrets," the shadow that informs so many of his writings.<sup>6</sup> Kipling was a master maker of rings: the private club, the hedged in and hidden house, the special, esoteric knowledge are all part of his characters' and his own enclosed approach to life. It was probably one way of keeping in the past while avoiding too close a scrutiny of the future.

Kipling is generally thought of as a bold, peppery, optimistic writer, much concerned with patriotism, "roots," and identity, all of it orchestrated for martial trumpets. As a matter of fact, Kipling belongs with today's authors who are occupied with humanity's sense of being lost and alienated. We may think that he is saying, with Blake, that "To be a child is to live in a world where everything is new and exciting and beckoning us toward delight" — Kipling may have believed this at times. But when his work is considered all of a piece, what he comes closer to saying is that to be a child is to live in a world that is new and exciting but that is luring us into despair. Each of us, in our own "houses," does what can be done to put up the "ring" that will keep away the endless dark and protect the joy and innocence of Paradise. At times a Hardy-esque fate appears to brood over Kipling's characters, at times his characters control their destinies. But no matter how "adult" a world is portrayed, there is always something childlike (not childish) operating in Kipling. If one pays close attention to Grace Ashcroft, for instance, one sees that whatever else she is about she is employing an adult version of the child's wishing-magic to create a ring which will shield Harry from death.

Nowhere in Kipling is there a sense of some final, spiritual future for mankind. The glow in whatever windows do open is a sunset glow, beautiful, perhaps radiant, but sad. The saving grace of Kipling's

world vision is that it lacks totally our modern bathos of self-pity and self-absorption, and that it is charged with vitality. It is an incredible vitality. It gives him his uncanny ability to evoke people, places, houses, atmospheres. It keeps the action going and, by its quality, makes us care. Even his doomed or broken people — Ameera, Carnehan, Jack Pansay — possess an aliveness, a strength of spirit, right to the end.

Whatever is sealed into the ring of humanity, vitality is its motor, vitality makes it "go." Sustaining Kipling personally through a lifetime of tragedy and precarious circumstance, it endows his people with the strength to endure, or to go down fighting, or to triumph in some way, or, if to perish, to do so with color or honor or for a cause (real or imaginary). Kipling is not all drums and trumpets: causes are at times travesty causes, heroism accidental, victories shallow or vain.<sup>7</sup> In the last analysis Kipling's vitality is not the vitality of primal innocence: it is a beguiling substitute, like the hunt for new lairs at the end of the Mowgli stories. And it is not Kipling's world vision, in itself, only the force behind it.

Kipling never answered the great, commanding, cosmic questions: what are we? whither are we bound? what is our purpose and destiny? His illumination of Paradise is like lightning, flickering over a vast, timeless playground for the young and innocent. Its unobtainable beauty lies like a shadow beneath the surface of his writings. It is as if Kipling has made an uneasy peace with the suspicion that the agony of the past is our only real future, as if he "used" Paradise as a hold over remembered joy, that "ring" conjured by a child to stave off the dark. Kipling's real world vision is people — good, bad, indifferent; noble, ugly, evil, angry, saucy, bold, clever, beautiful, pathetic. All have lost Paradise and in this sense are wholly united in the strange business of living without it. It is as if Kipling were saying "If I can't have Paradise, at least I have them." As he has Mrs. Hauksbee say in "A Second-Rate Woman," "in the absence of angels . . . men and women are the most fascinating things in the whole world."

#### NOTES

1. This study assumes a knowledge of Kipling's most widely read works. Enough detail has been given where stories less well known are involved to make clear their essential points. Space does not permit the detailing of each and every plot, of course, but while not everyone grows up with Kipling many have now read him because of renewed interest in the man and his works.
2. Angus Wilson, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978).

3. Kipling wisely omitted from *The Jungle Books* what may have been the first of the stories --an appallingly bad tale in which Mowgli is shown dallying with a pretty native girl whom he impregnates and later marries. He also goes to work for the British Forestry Service, and the picture of a salaried Mowgli looking forward to a pension is ludicrous. The story is of interest because it show Kipling working towards his ultimate concept of Mowgli. See "In the Rukh" in *Many Inventions*.
4. Philip Mason, *Kipling: The Glass, the Shadow and the Fire* (New York, Harper and Row, 1975), p. 178.
5. Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself*. In *Kipling: A Selection of His Stories and Poems*, John Beecroft, editor (Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1975), Vol. II, p. 320.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 389.
7. Read, for instance, "The Drums of the Fore and Aft."