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KIPLING'S FIRST VISIT TO AMERICA

WHEN RUDYARD KIPLING landed in San Francisco on May 28, 1889 (exactly eleven months after Robert Louis Stevenson sailed through the Golden Gate for Samoa), he was a complete unknown. But he had been a newspaper man all of his young life, and he got around quickly. The next two Sunday issues of the *San Francisco Examiner* printed interviews with the "bronzed featured, dark-eyed man, scarcely over thirty years of age." (He was twenty-three.)

Frank Bailey Millard claims to be the first American reporter to have interviewed the traveler from India. He says that Kipling, "like a true Britisher", walked all the way to the Palace Hotel from the Pacific Mail dock. Millard went to the hotel and found "A dark little man, with a round head, a good-natured countenance, a sort of cleft chin, a pair of sharp black eyes behind spectacles which I verily believe he wore to bed with him—a man of no account; just a plain travelling Englishman". After introducing himself, Millard "proceeded to exploit him, though the likelihood of getting anything worth while out of an obscure and doubtless barnacled Britisher was rather small."

Kipling was asked what he thought of San Francisco, and Millard reconstructs the following exchange:

"I have seen little of it, but it is hallowed ground to me because of Bret Harte."

"We Californians all venerate Bret Harte," I said proudly. "Our people nearly tore a fence to pieces up in Humboldt county once for relics of his handiwork; and so greatly do they love him that even yet, when it is known that Pat McCarren of Eureka and not Harte built the fence, they keep the bits of redwood as souvenirs."

"I am glad to hear that," he laughed, "but I have heard that your people resent Harte's expatriation—his long stay in England."

"They do," was the reply, "because it has led Mr. Harte into writing some strange anachronisms. The Californian of today dislikes to read in one of Mr. Harte's stories that the Sacramento Valley is a naked plain, when, as a matter of fact, it is all covered

with orchards, vineyards and grain fields. They feel that Mr. Harte has been away from us too long, and that he should return and get acquainted with our prune trees."

"There may be something in that," he said; "but a true artist can always paint very well at a long distance from his landscapes. Harte has done so well in England, and his work is so highly appreciated there, that I should think you might let him stay on our side and work out his own destiny."

Kipling continued to discuss Harte, waxing eloquent over "The Luck of Roaring Camp," "M'liss", and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," and he did not depart from the ground he had taken or acknowledge the point that was made when he was told that these stories, which were Harte's best work, and upon which his fame was based, were all written in California and that he had done nothing in England to compare with them. This talk led to an argument on the subject of English appreciation of American literature and *vice versa*, and it was agreed that the home view of exotic writing was generally a very narrow one. It was characteristic of the Briton, however, that Kipling did not seem to care what view was taken of British literature by Americans:

Mr. Kipling has celebrated our Bret Harte interview in his *American Note*, throughout which he exhibits a positive genius for reporting the thing which was not. For some occult purpose he makes me say foolishly that "Bret Harte claims California, but California doesn't claim Bret Harte." This is a very handy hook upon which to hang his epigram: "I never intended to curse the people with a provincialism so vast a that."

Millard says, however, that he was attracted by Kipling and his conversation, though he was not convinced of his great culture. Kipling was eloquent for five minutes at a time, but he was more given to inquiry than to imparting information. The two newspaper men walked along Market and Kearney Streets that night, and "picked up a late wandering friend . . . who, because he knew all about American politics, greatly interested Kipling. . . . I had never known a foreigner who asked so many questions, and such strange ones, about American affairs. Some of them seemed inspired and touched the very heart of our economic system, but for the most part they were naive enough."

In later meetings, walking and talking with the visitor, Bailey Millard observed that the prodigal free-lunch system of the saloons appealed strongly to Kipling, and that he "went everywhere while he was here, at least, everywhere he could see a pretty face."

As Kipling would have said: That is another story. Between 1898 and 1901, Millard wrote at least six articles on Kipling in San Francisco, and in two of them

he repeated himself practically word for word. We cannot know what Kipling said in San Francisco, but we can know what he wrote. Nor need we rely on the extensively edited *From Sea To Sea*, published in 1899. We can go back to the pirated (1891) *American Notes*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* of January 18, 1891, or, better yet, to *The Pioneer* of Allahabad (India) of November 30, 1889. Writing to the paper that was subsidizing his trip half-way around the world, Kipling started his first American letter—on San Francisco—with a quotation from Bret Harte:

Serene, indifferent to fate,
 Thou sittest at the western gate,
 Thou seest the white seas fold their tents
 Oh warder of two Continents.
 Thou drawest all things small and great
 To thee beside the western gate.

This is what Bret Harte has written of the great city of San Francisco, and for the past fortnight I have been wondering what made him do it. There is neither serenity nor indifference to be found in these parts and evil would it be for the continent whose wardship was entrusted to so reckless a guardian. Behold me pitched neck-and-crop into the whirl of California, deprived of the guidance of the Professor [Samuel Alexander Hill]—who, wise man, has fled to more settled places—and left to draw my own conclusions. Protect me from the wrath of an outraged community if these letters are ever read by American eyes. San Francisco is a mad city—a city inhabited for the most part by perfectly insane people whose women are of remarkable beauty. When the *City of Pekin* steamed through the Golden Gate I beheld with great joy that the block-house which guarded the mouth of the "finest harbour in the world, Sir," could be silenced by two gunboats from Hongkong with safety, comfort and despatch. Also there was not a single American vessel of war in the harbour. This may sound blood-thirsty, but remember I had come with a grievance upon me, the grievance of the piteous English books.

Then a reporter leaped aboard and ere I could gasp held me in his toils. He pumped me all the time I was getting ashore, demanding, of all things in the world, news about Indian journalism. It is an awful thing to enter a new land with a lie on your lips. I spoke the truth to the evil-minded Custom-house man who turned my most sacred sacrament on a floor composed of stable refuse and pine splinters but the reporter overwhelmed me not so much by his poignant audacity as his beautiful ignorance. I am sorry now that I did not tell more lies as I passed into a city of three hundred thousand white men.

Kipling's remarks on San Francisco (and on America) are no kindlier and no more disillusioning than the comments of the average intelligent British visitor to our shores. Allan Nevins says, "In all the century-long literature of the subject no descriptive passages show greater vividness and stylistic felicity than those of

Kipling." Although he criticized Americans for their rawnesses, he praised where praise was due. Perhaps he was harsh on the subject of journalism and reporters. Fresh from a caste society, where Anglo-Indians were the ruling class and were obliged—in public, at least—to be decorous and restrained, the young Kipling was shaken by the violence, the over-inquisitiveness, and the exhibitionism of some American newspapers.

The second letter from San Francisco, never reprinted in America, or in any of Kipling's books, appeared in the *Allahabad Pioneer* on December 7, 1889. This is the full text:

There are three great centres in America—San Francisco, Chicago, and New York. These three are administered by the alien for the alien—by the Irishman for his own interests and those of the German. And the rule of the Democracy is a rule of iron. The newspapers must bow to the power that controls the vote; and they bow with reverence. The Cronin murder at Chicago will be an old story by the time these lines reach you. I have seen paper after paper from Chicago, New York and in San Francisco dutifully suggesting that the murder was a "put up" business arranged by the British Government to discredit the Irish cause. The more outspoken journals vacillated pitifully between their desire to condemn the murderer and at the same time to refrain from offending Irish susceptibilities. And they were the journals of a free country, helping, it may be presumed, in the work of government. Wherefore they came to heel like whipped hounds at the bidding of the power that controlled them.

And, indeed, they were fit for no better fate. Within the past few weeks I have learned what it is to be ashamed of my profession. To their credit be it said that the average American journalist disclaims any idea of teaching or elevating his public. Not one, but scores of newspaper men have said to me: "We aren't responsible for the morals of the people. We give 'em what they want." Gentlemen not in the profession have bade me watch the papers in the hand of the crowd, and note how a cheap press was elevating the people. I prefer to believe the journalists. They are responsible for publications which are lively and perfect images of a purposeless Hell. With infinite pains and the expenditure of a vast amount of money they produce day by day newspapers that ought to move a man to despair. Their first need is sensation—and their last also. As a butcher dresses with red and blue calico rosettes the shamefully exposed vitals of the steer, so they dress their murder cases for the world to stare upon. It is no fault of theirs if they miss a single sob, squeak or gasp of the day's tale of woe. Disregarding such elementary pity as allows a stricken beast to get to his lair and die in peace, they send their brazen representatives to hunt down the relatives of the late and most notorious criminal, that the world may know how murderer Smith looks when he was a baby or a boy courting his first love. This is enterprise.

In scorn of common decency they judge and condemn the accused before a jury has been empanelled, trying a case day by day with the gaiety of a legally-appointed tribunal and the ignorance of the half-educated. For the sake of advertisement they employ

detectives of their own to hunt down or out or into doubly-confused confusion the mystery of the hour. And the impertinence is called enterprise. They publish feebly prurient slush of the pink-garter-and-black-silk-corsage order under the guise of fashionable notes; they foment discussion between citizen and citizen already bearing each other ill-will, in the hope that a "sensational affair" may result. They cause to be interviewed the abortionist and the adulteress, the "bonnet" [decoy] of a gambling saloon, the owner of an opium "joint"; and the seed of these interviews springs up and bears fruit throughout the city. They deal in personal invective always unedifying, frequently vulgar, and at times cowardly and brutal. They distort the reported speeches of their political opponents and do not present both sides of the question. They minister to the crazy self-consciousness of their nation by means of turgid statements of the "might, majesty, dominion and power" of the people. They collect news as the bower-bird gathers rubbish without order, arrangement or sense of proportion. Their interviewers are reckless of the truth, imperfectly informed, and insult to their boot heels. Lastly, they degrade, debase and defile the English language from day to day by persistent and wilful use of every variety of slang, cant, short cut, back talk, thieves' Latin and argot that can be gathered from the lips of the counter-jumper, engine-driver, brakeman, bar-tender, gambler or travelling salesman. They spawn hybrid words unfit for self-respecting tongue to touch, and sling them across the continent. So that they are now fast reducing the English tongue, their heritage, to the *lingua-franca* of the hotel-dock. They are without dignity, decency or reverence: and their reward is that no man shall respect them, though many shall fear their abuse and buy their favor.

And yet they are amusing, when one gets over the recurrent thrill of horror. The "direction" of a leading San Francisco journal aloft on the boundless sea of continental politics has lately been moving me to tears of graceless merriment. They were grappling with a European crisis and, naturally, spoke of "old Bismarck", "young William", and so forth in the true Republican spirit, and the way in which the royalties and diplomats of effete Europe were hanged and fumbled about was amazing. The writer was going to have Europe fixed to rights somehow, though he wasted half a column over it. If in the settling he ignored not more than three of the conditions under which Europe lies, and showed an all-embracing ignorance of the history of the past five years, the defaults did not weight his radiant spirit. A man does not know what genuine American humor means till he watches a journal sailing out upon the vast profound of "Russia and the Balkan States", "The Outlook in France", or something similar. But mirth dies swiftly in the face of other studies. It is not amusing to read again and again at breakfast in the papers from Chicago, Cincinnati, New York and the rest coarse, violent and ill-considered attacks on England, her Queen, her court, her customs and everything that is hers. Were the expressions of dislike genuine and prompted, let us say, by unquenched hate of a hundred years, they would be laudable enough, though hardly wise. But both those who write and those who read are at pains to assure you that the outpouring is nothing more than a daily performance gone through for the purpose of catching the Irish eye. And herein lies the sadness. The journals may be taken as representing public opinion, though everybody says they

don't. Here, then, we find a nation descended from Anglo-Saxon stock compelled to bespatter so many times per annum the land of its birth by order of an alien who does not happen to approve of the aforesaid land. The vituperative skittles may or may not find its way to England, where it does no harm beyond helping to still further corrupt our decaying speech: but what is the effect on the average American citizen? Does he without exception know that it is all play—ugly play because it is compulsory, but play none the less—or does he believe in it and mould his notions accordingly? I should very much like to find out. At present I cannot understand.

Side by side with this thorough-going denunciation of all things British, with prophecies of mutiny in India, insults to the Queen, and painstaking misapprehension of all our motives, exists an exquisite self-consciousness that shrieks aloud at a breath of criticism from the altogether despicable and of no account little island. *Exempta gratia*. There is a paper called *Puck* in New York which answers in some measure to *Punch*. A Saturday Reviewer wound up his weary tale of books not so long ago by hastily noting three or four volumes of light work by American authors. The notice did not occupy more than twenty or thirty lines altogether. These lines, *Puck*, a large paper, took for the text of a lengthy article headed "English Opinion on American Literature." The books represented America as much as the opinion represented England; but that was good enough for *Puck*, who waxed very serious over the matter and from the first to the tenth-rate journal this note of uneasiness runs without break. The leading journals of New York will devote time and space that is presumably valuable to rebuking a President's son for being "overcome by monarchical influence," the said son on a European tour merely having made himself pleasant, as every man of the world should do, to his hosts. This is provincialism, rank, untamed, contemptible, but pathetic.

Some day circumstances will call these journals to account for making fools of their *clientele*. It is not useful in season and out of season to pander to every form of pride that grows in the breast of a nation—to tell the town that there was never finer corn on the sod—the village that there was never sturdier commune—the man that there was never better citizen—or the author and poet that they excel their brethren throughout the earth. Because the earth is a very big place, stocked with some remarkable large men, and the end of these dreamings is an uncomfortable awakening or, if not, at least the lowering of self-respect. A parish tucked away in the fold of some lonely hillside may be justified in believing in its own virtues to the exclusion of all others: but a big country is not a parish.

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As these things are written, the great American nation have learned that their delegates at Berlin have settled with Prince Bismarck the international control of affairs in Samoa, and are very much disposed to believe that America in the matter has got the best of Germany. I fancy they will be undeceived later on: but that is beside the question. The visible result is vastly entertaining. With one consent the newspapers childishly joyed at their country's plunge into the troubled waters of continental diplomacy and are at one in declaring that never have such skilled negotiators (American) co-

ducted so delicate and august an affair (American). "—Henceforward", they cry, "our country must take her place among the powers in lively earnest. She must be respected more than of old. She must dabble in foreign affairs and impress the world."

It is a very big boy whose first tail-coat, fresh from the tailor, sits uneasily on his big limbs, and dearly he desires recognition at the hands of the old men. But he comes into their presence whistling, his hat on his head, his hands in his pockets and uninformed insolence in his restless eye. "I *am* a man, a great, big, grown-up, live man. Hear me cuss," says he. And he cusses.

"Run along and grow, my son" answer the seniors. "Come back in a little time and tell us all about it."

And now to get back to the first letter and Frank Bailey Millard. This is Kipling's version of what happened:

It happened this way. A reporter asked me what I thought of the city, and I made answer suavely that it was hallowed ground to me because of Bret Harte. That was true. "Well," said the reporter, "Bret Harte claims California, but California don't claim Bret Harte. He's been so long in England that he's quite English. Have you seen our Cracker-factories or the new offices of the *Examiner*?" He could not understand that to the outside world the city was worth a great deal less than the man. I never intended to curse the people with a provincialism so vast as this.

It has been reported more than once, and denied just as often, that Kipling worked on this or that San Francisco newspaper. That he did is extremely unlikely. His visit was brief—several weeks—and he was not short of money, nor did he become pressed for money until he settled in London, in the fall of 1889. However, he appears to have been a frequent visitor to editorial offices, and it is not surprising that aging reporters seem to recollect that Kipling worked with them. For instance, Charles Kenmore Ulrich, of the old *San Francisco Chronicle* says:

During the few days he [Kipling] served as reporter on the *Chronicle* staff he prepared his copy at a table to my left, and I observed that he wrote laboriously with a pen, scattered much ink about and was so near-sighted that he seemed to bury his face in his copy.

"What a bally ass your city editor is!" he complained in my hearing one night. "He sends me to do funerals and write obits when I'd much rather do a cock fight. Bally ass!" he grumbled again as he resumed his work. This finished, he turned in his copy and vanished without a word.

One night Kipling entered the office in considerable excitement. Seating himself near me, he growled angrily. It developed later that he had submitted several manuscript stories to Frank Pixley, then editor of the *Argonaut*, and that they had been returned to him with regrets as unavailable for publication in the columns of that once celebrated periodical.