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Mr. Kipling and Clergymen.

BY THE REV. W. A. PURTON, B.A.

I HAVE seen it stated that Rudyard Kipling is of Nonconformist ancestry. If that is so, and I believe it to be the case, it will probably account for the curious fact that he nowhere alludes to Nonconformist ministers. I am a pretty diligent student of his writings, and cannot call to mind a single instance of a dissenting parson in all Kipling's gallery. How different from Dickens! Why did he invent a Stiggins and a Chadband? Perhaps because his boyhood was spent in the shadow of Rochester Cathedral, and he soaked in ecclesiastical traditions; and the converse of this is that Kipling leaves the Nonconformists lovingly alone.

So it happens that only English clergy and Roman Catholic priests are "photographically lined" in his album; and, it goes without saying, in deft, brilliant touches, which often convey a whole generalization in a phrase. It may be of interest to examine some of these, and thus gather what impression has been left in the mind of a singularly brilliant writer with a wide knowledge of the world. Two points will infallibly impress themselves on the attention of every reader of Kipling—one is his almost contemptuous mastery of words, the other is his acute grip of technical details. I need not elaborate the first feature. There is an absolutely accurate use of terms and phrases which arrests attention by its exactness and compels admiration by its beauty—the beauty which comes from truth. If ever there was a "lord of language" it is he. An inferior writer slings about epithets and adjectives of all sorts, in the hope that some of them will stick; but Kipling's are inevitable. One is reminded of Flaubert's saying: "If I call stones blue, it is because blue is the precise word, believe me." There is a delightful charm in this precision, and it is manifest, also, in the definite way in which distinct classes of words are used as the vehicle in which to convey different subjects.

This versatility is shown, to mention only one comparison, in the boisterous storm-tossed verses of "The Sea and the Hills," *e.g.* :

"Who has desired the sea?—the immense and contemptuous surges?
The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bowsprit
emerges?"

and so on, when contrasted with the sweet Saxon simplicity of the "Ode to Sussex," where every line tells you of the green turf and daisies, the sheep-bells and dew-ponds, that characterize the Southdown country, where

"Little, lost, Down churches praise
The Lord who made the hills."

Kipling is like a dog who smells out the right word and marks it. That is well, that is his *métier*, the trade of "the artist and colourman in words."

But it is when we analyse the second point that we become conscious of a vague feeling of uneasiness. The first impression is one of hard, impenetrable brilliancy, as of something recently painted with bright enamel. But on closer inspection there are cracks. The paint is chipped in some places; there are lumps which are unpleasant to the touch, and smears which are distasteful to the eye. The whole effect is not so real as it appeared at first. Kipling is a marine engineer in "The Ship that Found Herself," a locomotive engineer in "'007," a schoolmaster in "Stalky and Co.," and a curate in "The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot." But, convincing as the wonderful mastery of details and the inside knowledge of the craft appear to be, I find myself wondering what a *real* marine engineer and a *real* railwayman would think of the portraits of their little worlds, because I, as a former schoolmaster and an ex-curate, can see traces of brilliant unreality and impenitent invention in the tales dealing with the trades of which I have expert knowledge. The plain truth is that no author, however subtle, can have all crafts at his fingers' ends by a mere outside inspection. It takes more than that.

“ ‘ Would’st thou ’—so the helmsman answered,
 ‘ Learn the secret of the sea ?
 Only those who brave its dangers
 Comprehend its mystery ! ’ ”

But I should imagine, on the other hand, that our author has learnt the life of the Indian jungle. At all events, I prefer to think so. Even Mowgli might have been; and the beast folk, his friends, can talk and yet be natural. It does not matter that the whole effect is fabulous; it is set in real scenery.

Now, let us examine, to begin with, “The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot.” I must confess that this story of the squalid always fills me with amazement. I don’t suppose Mr. Kipling is a district visitor—I should doubt if he were even a Sunday-school teacher; but one is compelled to admit that in whatever way he gleaned his information he has succeeded in presenting it convincingly. This is a “tale of mean streets” which puts them before your eyes. Here comes in the Rev. Eustace Hanna, the “curick.” He is devoted, energetic, not very acute, and rather hampered by his love for Sister Eva. Since she, as well as himself, worked in Gunnison Street, the dangers of which were manifest—“these considerations cast the soul of the Rev. Eustace Hanna into torment that no leaning upon Providence could relieve.” But Brother Victor of the Order of Little Ease was different. “The law of his Church made suffering easy. His duty was to go on with his work until he died.” Now, why does Kipling elaborate this distinction? Does he mean to convey that a celibate priesthood is the best? If not, why does he introduce the distinction at all? Possibly the art of the teller of tales has induced him to heighten the effect with dexterous touches of paint, which are merely laid on with a view to a picturesque contrast.

Then poor Badalia is murdered. “The Church of Rome acquitted itself nobly with bandages, while the Church of England could only pray to be delivered from the sin of envy.”

On her death-bed Badalia, just hinting at a hopeless affection she herself had conceived for the "curick," brings about an understanding between him and Sister Eva. "You two go along and make a match of it. I've wished other ways often; but o' course it was not for the likes o' me." Brother Victor had fetched Sister Eva to the bedroom, and stood outside the door, with the breath coming harshly between his teeth, for he was in pain. It must be conceded that in many respects this presentment gives the palm to the Roman, and this leads me to make my first deduction, which I think will be shown fully further on, that Mr. Kipling possesses a curious kind of reluctant admiration of Roman Catholic clergy, and a species of "passive resistance" towards the good qualities of the Anglicans. Non-conformist ancestry again!

Now let us examine another type in the school chaplain. In "Stalky and Co.," I think, the author shows most vividly his striking power of seizing upon salient points. A school chaplain is, and must be in many ways, different from a parochial clergyman. There is greater freedom; one is surrounded almost exclusively by mercurial and lively boys; the work is easier in some respects, more difficult in others. All this has been grasped by the boy who was educated at Westward Ho! But, clever as the portrait of the Rev. John Gillett is, it is not convincing. There is a bit too much of *sans gêne* and unconventionality about him. He thinks a great deal more than is necessary of boys who call him "padre," and his attitude towards the other masters is not altogether loyal. Here, again, we may note that our author has realized with almost uncanny insight much of the inner life of a masters' common-room. One is humiliated to read of the petty motives, the sudden gusts of temper, the small jealousies, the purblind injustices; and is inclined to sympathize with the rather pessimistic author of the "Upton Letters" who rises from a perusal of this school story with a feeling of depression; or even to agree with the chaplain himself in his remark: "Ours is a dwarfing life—a belittling life, my brethren! God help all schoolmasters! They need it."

It is easy to see that Kipling rather likes his school chaplain. He is quick-witted, subtle, honestly fond of the boys, and makes for the well-being of the school. But the whole story is not satisfactory. It is not the photograph of real school life that so many generations of boys (and masters) have been looking for. The staff is caricatured; the chaplain is an exaggeration; and though sure ground is touched in some of the descriptions of the small boys—*e.g.*, the scene in the lower classroom, where they roast sparrows on nibs at gas-jets and pursue other unholy avocations—yet the heroes, the famous three, are impossible. They are not ordinary human boys at all; and as for their speeches and exploits, why, in the words of Judge Brack in “Hedda Gabler”: “But, may God take pity on us—people don’t *do* such things as that!”

Finally, we will examine the army chaplain department. Here Kipling is in his favourite India, and writes about persons familiar to him. The chronicler of the three modern musketeers must have met many “devil-dodgers,” or “sky-pilots,” as the senior service more poetically calls them. We are not introduced personally to Father Victor, who is frequently mentioned as having Mulvaney’s conscience in his keeping; but we hear enough of him to receive one more impression of the curious *tendresse* that Kipling has for the Roman priest. In the “Story of the Gadsbys,” when Mrs. Gadsby is in the valley of the shadow of death, we meet the junior chaplain, “drifting generally and uneasily through the house.” He is doing no particular good, is rather in people’s way, and is somewhat of a butt; but in his mild way he scores several times off the doctor and Captain Maffin. Finally, he makes himself useful in the nick of time, and drives off to fetch another doctor at a pace that extorts the Captain’s grudging admiration. He is utterly devoid of tact, but is conscientious and devoted, and, on the whole, can be best labelled with that doleful epithet “well-meaning.”

The “Judgment of Dungara” is an amusing story of a German mission in India. It scarcely concerns our particular

examination, because the Rev. Justus Krenk is a Lutheran. But we may notice that Kipling speaks with exceeding sympathy of mission-work. There is a vein of solemnity in the couple of pages which he devotes to this subject which is good reading. It makes little difference that this German mission meets with temporary failure; no doubt that heightens the serio-comic aspect of the story. One is thankful to read, in words which seem to be heartfelt, this fine appreciation of mission-work, and the more so that, in his deep sympathy with the peoples of the East, Kipling is occasionally a little unjust towards the efforts of the West. Who, for instance, are the "beef-fed zealots" who "threaten ill to Buddha and Kamakura"? Are they the co-religionists of the author of the great "Recessional"? The opening verse of the poem which contains this quotation occurs as a chapter-heading in "Kim," and runs as follows:

"Oh! ye who tread the Narrow Way,
By Tophet-flare to Judgment Day,
Be gentle when the 'heathen' pray
To Buddha at Kamakura!"

There is, or so it seems to me, a needlessly offensive insinuation in these lines; a hint, if I read it right, of something which is certainly not found in the attitude of modern missionaries towards those who worship in ignorance what they set forth unto them. *Sed hæc hæctenus.*

This digression leads me finally to examine what I consider in some respects Kipling's finest work. I mean "Kim." It is a noble book. The guileless old Lama, that "fearful" man the Babu, the impish Kim, and many others, take their place in the class of real friends in the world of fiction. I do not know how many times I have read the story; I hope to read it many times more. I would cheerfully surrender all that the mighty Hall Caine ever wrote, and even abandon all the efforts of the peerless Marie Corelli for this one story.

Bennett, the Church of England chaplain to the Mavericks, had marched all day with the regiment to prove his mettle. At the end of mess he left the tent and stepped on the eavesdropping

Kim, whom he held tenaciously in spite of his struggles. When he discovered that the native-looking boy spoke English he summoned Father Victor, the Roman Catholic chaplain (Kipling seems fond of the name Victor in this connexion). I quote from our author : " Between himself and the Roman Catholic chaplain of the Irish contingent lay, as Bennett believed, an unbridgeable gulf ; but it was noticeable that whenever the Church of England dealt with a human problem she was very likely to call in the Church of Rome." Then there is a triangular conference between Bennett, Father Victor, and the Lama, who all discuss the future of the reluctant Kim. Bennett is unintelligent but tenacious. It is arranged between the two padres that Kim is to be brought up as a Protestant. But the Anglican chaplain is sent off with the regiment to a frontier war. In his absence Father Victor sends Kim to the school of St. Xavier, at Lucknow, to be brought up as a Roman Catholic, having previously " for three long mornings discoursed to him of an entirely new set of gods and godlings—notably of a goddess called Mary, who, he gathered, was one with Bibi Miriam, of Mahbub Ali's theology." Undoubtedly Father Victor was adroit.

Here I conclude. Reducing all the clerical characters in the different stories to a common denominator, one finds that Kipling considers the Roman Catholic priest as acute, subtle, sympathetic, and not unduly scrupulous ; while the Anglican is tactless, hardworking, conscientious, and narrow - minded. The Nonconformist is non-existent.

Well, it might be worse.

But I end, as I began, by wondering whether early training and the subconscious self have not something to do with these ideas of the great Anglo-Indian.

