

Plain Tales from the Hills
Foreword

Rudyard Kipling wrote these stories when he was very young. They were made into a book 1888. He was 22 and he actually had a choice of publishers vying for them – publishers in India, that is, the country of his birth and his fixed attention for a large proportion of his early life. The stories were to become an international success. So was he. Soon after they had appeared in a handsome, green Indian Railway Library paperback edition and he had enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing his fellow expatriates engrossed in his work on the long railway journeys that linked their sprinkled existence he himself left India. He only ever went back for a short time once. By the time he arrived in London after an extended world-encircling journey the capitol was waiting to celebrate its new young genius. He was awarded the status of ‘a great find’. A professor of literature was to rush into his class clutching one of his poems and proclaim ‘here’s literature at last.’ He was invited to the salons of the rich and famous and ushered into the Saville Club and the company of his fellow scribes.

The era needed star entertainers as we need pop stars and film stars, and it was writers of short fiction who were worshipped. Thanks to recent Education Acts a new literate, *Daily Mail* audience were hungry for stories. They had their magazine writer-heroes – Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arnold Bennett, Oscar Wilde, Somerville and Ross. Their names themselves sold copies. So potent was their appeal that we know these authors today, even though we have forgotten those closer to our own time.

This audience was also surrounded by its Empire. Imperial Docks unloaded Imperial riches. Urban wage slaves washed themselves with Imperial Soap. And they sought entertainment written on Imperial Typewriters. Kipling, emerging out of this hugely influential but largely misunderstood hinterland, one that reached right into the heart of London, swiftly became adopted as the voice of the age. He was to become a prophet of modern communication and solid pragmatism. His working characters may have been comically voiced but they were also credible and hard-edged.

In these early stories he offered something different, though. It wasn’t romance, though there are ‘Indian Gothic’ stories in this mixed bag. Some of these early tales certainly have an exotic whiff of the bazaar and the bizarre. There are opium dens and upper rooms and barred gates and blazing suns, familiar to readers of eastern adventure stories, but in an age that sought its escapism in the Alhambra or Mecca theatres, what he actually offered was a shocking dose of realism. This was raw truth.

Remember that wrote these tales originally for a discerning and slightly grumpy reader: the Anglo-Indians themselves. They were not going to be fooled by turbans, scimitars and mock-heroics. They knew the realities of the job and the existence. And they knew that their ‘motherland’ both misunderstood and misinterpreted their role in India. So these are insider stories, not outwardly there to justify any Sahib’s behaviour or make a political point (though there is plenty of justification and point making hidden away) they have the knowingness of a community who knew what they were about and what their role really entailed. They are wry, where you might expect fancy and astonishingly sophisticated where you might expect innocence. Here are women who tease and desert men, men who continue with jobs they hate, officers who cover up the failure of young innocents and disillusioned old hands who give way to the lassitudes of the environment. But they are set against the harsh mores of the system and show how that system, foolish and incestuous though it may have been, actually protected those who serve it, and tempted the adventurous. They are surprisingly judgemental portraits. These are not heroic people. They are ordinary. The stories were meant to be read by the engineers, soldiers, administrators and doctors who really lived the reality of Empire service. There is a healthy distrust of the Calcutta bureaucratic official, the snobbish social scene, and political interference from England.

Reviewing the collection in the 1890s Oscar Wilde found that ‘The jaded second rate Anglo Indians are in exquisite incongruity with their surroundings.’ He called Kipling himself ‘our first authority on the second rate.’ So much for the ‘sons of heaven’ as the British were known to the Indians. But in Wilde’s camp dismissiveness there is also an understanding of

the secret of Kipling's impact. Though coming from an artistic background, Kipling never attended university. He was contemptuous of long-haired aesthetes of London. From the age of 16, a working journalist in Lahore, he had been loaded with back-breaking adult responsibility. He was writing about work and managed to understand and embrace the resentments of the dutiful. Nobody in these stories was waiting for a legacy to free them from the blacking factory. *Plain Tales* is a celebration of professionalism. The stories had an integrity that was recognised by the working audience that bought them. They smelled of authenticity and reflected the values of the vast majority of his readership. They have rightly been compared with Chekhov.

Kipling was to become the highest paid author of the Edwardian period. He continued to find a popular voice and consorted with prime ministers and adventurers. In later years he was to write far more wilful pieces about the Empire. *Kim*, his masterpiece, is a very different book. It seeks to explain and evoke but does so through a dust cloud of memory and ambivalence. In later stories, like *The Night Mail*, Kipling paints the servants of the Raj as if they were dedicated aid workers. Perhaps he increasingly felt the need to be didactic and supportive and inform England about the sacrifices made by its servants. Yet here, in his earliest work the picture is less fuzzy-edge. It is pin-sharp, focused and cruel. These stories are the best account of the nature of the Victorian Raj ever written.

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