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Kim

by Rudyard Kipling



With an Introduction by
Morton N. Cohen



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Rudyard Kipling

was born in Bombay, India, to British parents on December 30, 1865. In 1871 Rudyard and his sister, Trix, aged three, were left to be cared for by a couple in Southsea, England. Five years passed before he saw his parents again. His sense of desertion and despair were later expressed in his story "Baa Baa, Black Sheep" (1888), in his novel *The Light that Failed* (1890), and in his autobiography, *Something of Myself* (1937). As late as 1935 Kipling still spoke bitterly of the "House of Desolation" at Southsea: "I should like to burn it down and plough the place with salt."

At twelve he entered a minor public school, the United Services College at Westward Ho, north Devon. In *Stalky and Co.* (1899) the myopic Beetle is a self-caricature, and the days at Westward Ho are recalled with mixed feelings. At sixteen, eccentric and literary, Kipling sailed to India to become a journalist. His Indian experiences led to seven volumes of stories, including *Soldiers Three* (1888) and *Wee Willie Winkie* (1888).

At twenty-four he returned to England and quickly turned into a literary celebrity. In London he became close friends with an American, (Charles) Wolcott Balestier, with whom he collaborated on what critics called a "dime store novel." Wolcott died suddenly in 1891, and a few weeks later Kipling married Wolcott's sister, Caroline. The newlyweds settled in Brattleboro, Vermont, where Kipling wrote *The Jungle Book* (1894), *The Second Jungle Book* (1895), and most of *Captains Courageous* (1897). By this time Kipling's popularity and financial success were enormous.

In 1899 the Kiplings settled in Sussex, England, where he wrote some of his best books: *Kim* (1901), *Just So Stories* (1902), and *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906). In 1907 he received the Nobel prize for literature. By the time he died, on January 18, 1936, critical opinion was deeply divided about his writings, but his books continued to be read by thousands, and such unforgettable poems and stories as "Gunga Din," "If," "The Man Who Would Be King," and "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" have lived on in the consciousness of succeeding generations.

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Introduction: Kim and Kipling

by Morton N. Cohen

Kim is Rudyard Kipling's most important single work: it is, by any standard, this poet's finest prose achievement. But it is even more than that because, while an important work of art, it emerges as an invaluable historical document. Published for the first time in 1901, the work of an Englishman who understood India as well as any western artist ever has, it stands both between two centuries and between two cultures, East and West. It poses problems of empire building that confronted the world in the nineteenth century, and it poses problems of racial identity and justice that have preoccupied our own age. Written by the laureate of the British Empire, it is also a harbinger of the Empire's dissolution. These intrinsic values, and others, make *Kim* as significant for history as it is for art.

Kipling usually wrote shorter works than *Kim*. His strength lay in brevity, in striking with an iron that stayed hot but a little while. His forte was the poem and the short story. *Kim* is different in size and in shape, even as its origin and evolution differ from most of Kipling's other works.

As a young newspaperman working in India, Kipling began to write a novel, his "masterpiece," as he sardonically referred to it. He gave it the title "Mother Maturin," and on July 30, 1885, five months before his twentieth birthday, recorded in a letter that he had 237 pages already written. Almost all we know about the story is what a friend wrote about it: ". . . It is the story of an old Irishwoman who kept an opium den in Lahore but sent her daughter to be educated in England. She married a Civilian and came to live in Lahore—hence a story how Government secrets came to be known in the Bazaar and *vice versa*."

Kipling worked away at his novel, in India, then later in London, and, after he married and moved with his bride to the U.S.A., in Vermont. But it was never to be published. Kipling's father, his closest adviser and perhaps his most percipient critic, thought the thing not good enough for the printer, and young Kipling heeded his father's advice.

He decided instead to invent a new story, the tale of a young man, an orphan son of an Irish sergeant who served and died in India. Left a waif to fend for himself, he has many adventures. Those adventures would supply the narrative thread and enable Kipling to reveal the India he sought to capture. In fact, *Kim* would epitomize the East, until his true identity is discovered. It clearly had the makings of a good yarn.

In 1896 Kipling and his family returned to England from the States and settled near some relatives in Rottingdean, on the south coast, about sixty miles from London. Here Kipling turned purposefully to his second Indian novel and worked on it steadily. Again his father's approbation of what he wrote was essential. Kipling himself recalled how he wrote the tale:

In the gloomy, windy autumn *Kim* came to me with insistence, and I took it to be smoked over with my Father. Under our united tobaccos it grew. . . . I went home much fortified and *Kim* took care of himself. The only trouble was to keep him within bounds. Between us, we knew every step, sight, and smell of his casual road, as well as all the persons he met. . . . At last I reported *Kim* finished. "Did it stop, or you?" the Father asked. And when I told him that it was *it*, he said: "Then it oughtn't to be too bad."

Both father and son did indeed know every nook and cranny mentioned or described in *Kim*: the huge tapestry, the brilliant colors, the clash of cultures, the lavish mixed with the sordid, the crowds of the bazaars and the Grand Trunk Road—they knew it all, in the way only Britons of Victoria's time knew the outposts of Empire. In truth, the Kiplings acquired their knowledge and understanding of the East in an exquisitely romantic manner.

Kipling's father came of a family of architects and Methodist ministers. He was scholarly, literary, and perhaps most of all, artistic. In his early twenties, he worked in London as a sculptor on the construction of the Victoria and Albert Museum. For a time after that, he was employed in Staffordshire, in Wedgwood country, designing pottery. It was here that John Lockwood Kipling met the woman he would marry, Alice MacDonald, whose sister had married the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones. The Rossetti brothers, Ford

Madox Brown, and Algernon Charles Swinburne showed up for the Kipling wedding. Indeed they went ahead with the party, but without the bride and bridegroom, who had that day boarded a ship to India, where John had been offered, and had accepted, a job as principal of an art school in Bombay. That was in the middle of March 1865. Before the year ended, on December 30, their first child was born, a son, to whom they gave the name of Joseph Rudyard—Joseph after his paternal grandfather, Rudyard in deference to Lake Rudyard, where the parents had first met. Two and a half years later, the birth of a daughter, named Alice and known as "Trix," completed the family.

When Rudyard was six, he and his sister were taken to Southsea, England, for their education. They were lodged with a mad zealot whose name had been plucked from an advertisement. For five long years, Rudyard, who for reasons not altogether clear, became the target of the harridan's hatred, suffered ridicule, half-blindness, emotional hunger, deprivations, and thrashings in what he later characterized as the "House of Desolation."

In 1877 his near-blindness brought his mother from the East. For the first time she realized what her son had been enduring, and she set about making amends. At twelve, furnished with a much needed pair of eyeglasses, Kipling entered the United Services College at Westward Ho! in Devonshire, where an old family friend was headmaster. Here Kipling found order, companionship, and understanding. For the first time he was permitted to read freely, and he did so with a passion, satisfying a deep hunger that had grown in the House of Desolation. "Gigger," as he was known (from "Giglamps," his eyeglasses), shared a study with congenial, bright fellow-students and found receptive advisers among the masters. He wrote often for the school magazine, and when he was fifteen, his parents assembled some of his early verses in a privately printed Indian volume entitled *Schoolboy Lyrics*. While still at Westward Ho!, he sold his first literary piece, to a London newspaper—for a guinea.

Kipling left the college in September 1882 to rejoin his parents in India and just before his seventeenth birthday took a job as assistant editor of the *Civil and Military Gazette*, an influential newspaper in Lahore. As a newspaperman, Kipling "never worked less than ten hours and seldom more than fifteen per diem," by his own account. The result was that he

became absorbed in India and everything Indian. He thrived. Verses and stories poured from his pen, he perfected his craft, and he found and shaped a literary identity.

Kipling's first important book was *Departmental Ditties*, published anonymously in Lahore in 1886, a collection of light verse that had appeared earlier in the *Civil and Military Gazette*. The volume became widely popular in India and found its way to London, where Andrew Lang reviewed it in *Longman's Magazine*. *Plain Tales from the Hills* appeared in 1888; it contained thirty-two stories that had also appeared earlier in the *C and M Gazette* and eight new ones. This volume, too, won a ready audience in the East, and popular acclaim led Kipling to write still more stories for a series of six volumes in the India Railway Library. These works established him as an important new writer of the day. No wonder, for the booklets contained such gems as "Soldiers Three," "The Story of the Gadsbys," "The Man Who Would Be King," "Baa Baa, Black Sheep" (Kipling's reconstruction of the miserable years at Southsea), and other tales now considered classics.

Kipling's literary apprenticeship came to an end in early 1889, when, after six years of hard work, he sailed for England. Once in London and on his own, he began to rediscover the England he had left behind as a schoolboy. He found that his reputation had preceded him, and he was quickly taken up by the literary lions, not only Andrew Lang, but also Rider Haggard, W. E. Henley, Edmund Gosse, and Henry James. From his rooms in Villiers Street emerged *The Light That Failed* (1890) and *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892), and both took London by storm.

On January 18, 1892, Kipling married an American, Caroline Balestier, (Henry James gave the bride away), and soon Caroline took over the management of her husband's personal and professional life. The couple moved to Brattleboro, Vermont, where Caroline had grown up. Kipling built a commodious house, "Naulakha," on the side of a hill and there wrote his two *Jungle Books* (1894-95) and *Captains Courageous* (1897), his tale of life on an American fishing schooner. But a dispute with his brother-in-law Beatty Balestier in 1896 went to the courts, got into the newspapers, and ultimately drove the Kiplings back to England. Eventually the Kiplings purchased "Bateman's," a Jacobean stone house near Burwash in Sussex, about forty-five miles south of London,

and lived out the rest of their lives there. At Bateman's, Kipling wrote the bulk of his later works, including *Debts and Credits* (1926) and *Limits and Renewals* (1932). The beautiful, lonely Sussex countryside became the backdrop for some of his stories, for example *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910). The range of his stories and verse is remarkable: sailors and the sea in *Traffics and Discoveries* (1904); science fiction like "With the Night Mail" (1909); and soldiers in World War I, as in *A Diversity of Creatures* (1917). After the war, Kipling's stories became subtler and more complex technically; they were long ignored by readers and critics but have come into their own more recently.

It is, however, Kipling's theme of East-and-West, the Indian stories and verse, the landscape of Empire, that he is best known for and in which, in fact, he did his best and most original work. Among these works, *Kim* stands out above the rest, like the tallest peak of the Himalayas.

Although on the face of it, the tale is a simple string of adventures, and the whole adds up to a novel of sorts, it has given readers and critics considerable trouble. They ask what the story is really about. Is it about Kim or about something else? Is it about a boy's betrayal of his friends? Is the story a prelude to the Great Game, the treacherous business of tracking down spies in the mountains? And where does the lama fit into the tale, why does he befriend Kim, and why does he search so ardently for the River of the Arrow? Do the Great Game, the Grand Trunk Road, the River of the Arrow mean just what they seem to mean or have they larger, symbolic meanings, for Westerners as well as for Easterners? Why, in such a short book, does Kipling carve out such an enormous landscape, why does he pack it so tightly with so many characters?

In simplest terms, the book tells the story of Kimball O'Hara, an orphaned Irish waif left to make his way in the native quarter of Lahore. He takes up with an aged lama, the proverbial wise man, and together they wander through India, particularly over the Grand Trunk Road, until Kim is adopted by the Irish regiment in which his father served and is given a proper English education. The book is distinctive for its realistic picture of Indian life, for implied parallels with Kipling's own life, and for the symbols, parables, and mystery

that haunt its pages, as if it were in all an allegory, a universal narrative of epic dimensions.

Kim came upon the literary scene unexpectedly and defied not only the conventional prose styles of the time but all previous definitions of storytelling. Literature is history's handmaiden, and turn-of-the-century readers and critics had come to terms with old-fashioned vehicles and a good many newfangled ones as well—they had absorbed the English efforts at naturalism, the factory novel, the novel of society, the novel of provincial life, the novel with innovative language, the pre-Freudian novel, the art-for-art's-sake novel, the decadent novel, and the religious novel.

But *Kim* did not fit any of these molds: it was different in many ways. It was, to begin with, a novel of Empire, and that was a relatively new phenomenon. It was not surprising that English literature would follow the Union Jack to the far corners of the British Empire, but Kipling stands in the forefront of the ranks of writers who went to the distant outposts and came away so deeply affected by their experiences that they set out to conquer new realms in literary expression.

Rider Haggard had already begun to do it for Africa with his swashbuckling tales of the jungle and the veldt. Haggard did it well, but Kipling, in *Kim*, did it better, both in capturing the scene and in depicting character.

All these books by Haggard, Kipling, other writers, are, in one sense, travel books. They provide an early picture of a part of Great Britain that Londoners and other fog-bound British could comprehend with ease, even excitement. Indeed they opened the eyes of the people at home to a part of their world that very few knew anything about, and they quickened pulses at comfortable English hearths with a desire to share in the imperial adventure.

In *Kim* we have, for the first time, India's complexity, its mystery, its redolent squalor, its delicate spirituality, all side by side. This is India in the third-class railway carriage, India of the bazaars and the brothels, India of the Grand Trunk Road, India of the plains, the hills, the mountains, the sahib's India, the Indian's India, quiet Indian villages and teeming city streets. Here is the caste system, the multiplicity of races, religions, dialects. Here is the overpowering heat of the cities, the brutal cold of the hills. Here are veiled women, harems. Here are international crooks, jugglers, beggars, moneylenders. Here is natural beauty concealing disease.

Here are brilliant sunshine, choking dust, fierce and endless rain. Here are foreign manners and customs. Here are rich and poor, spies, soldiers, horse dealers, people of every description and belief. Here are a variety of creeds, a multiplicity of tongues, various ways of dressing. Here is everything that went to make up the India that Kipling and his family knew and that no longer exists. The landscape is as foreign as anything a Westerner can imagine. Yet Kipling's genius makes it as real and familiar as Kensington Gardens to a Londoner or Central Park to a New Yorker.

And Kipling peoples this crowded landscape with characters who live and breathe as convincingly as they did in the more familiar sitting rooms and slums, even more so, and he gives us a tale of a young man's growth and accomplishments that transcends nationality and geography. Kim and the people around him speak believable sentences, dream believable dreams, feel believable emotions.

Kipling was able to set all this down effectively in part because he had spent two important segments of his life in India, during some of his most impressionable and formative years. True, at the beginning he was there as the son of an English sahib, with nannies and ayahs to care for him, to protect him from the world around him. For a growing boy, shut up in an English home in India, the out-of-doors must have held many wonders, enchantments, temptations. He must have dreamed, as a lad, of escaping the formality and discipline of the English home, of dressing as an Indian to look like the youngsters he could see through the windows, and he must have mused about exploring the back streets of the city and wandering through this foreign country as one of its own, through the bazaars, mixing with Indians, eating their food, talking their language, listening to their tales—in short, he must have fancied himself a sort of Kimball O'Hara.

This is the magic of *Kim* the novel, the key to understanding part of its mystery: *Kim* is a story that a man invented, but it is also a fantasy that the man lived in a realistic setting as a youngster. Kipling, moreover, is not only imagining—he is also remembering. The book is an exercise in both nostalgic reconstruction and in wish fulfillment. The sublimation, the frustration that Kipling experienced as a disciplined, restrained youngster results in the creative explosion that compensated the grown man. Kipling channeled that explosive energy, shaped it, and the result is art.

Actually the British bits of the story are rather ordinary, but when Kim is Indian, when he is in the bazaars or on the Grand Trunk Road, when he's living and sharing adventures with the lama, when he's free of Western and British restraint, he lives intensively: it is then that Kipling's imagination soars and ranges heavenward. When Kim ceases to be an Indian vagrant, when he dresses up in white man's clothes and goes to school, he becomes far less interesting, he ceases to be mysterious. But even after that, Kim is able to escape the sahib's life on holidays, and again the story picks up and we get more of the mystery that enthalls us.

Kipling, of course, gives us much more than the young man Kim. If we consider Hurree Chunder Mookerjee, Mahbub Ali, Lurgan, and certainly the lama, we see that each is a stroke of genius in himself; together they serve as the four structural pillars of the tale.

Because Kipling knew his India so well, the story is not really English. Kipling, in fact, did not think of himself as a product of England. "I am slowly discovering England which is the most wonderful foreign land I have ever been in," he wrote to Rider Haggard in 1902. Kipling was a colonial, an Anglo-Indian in spirit if not by birth, and he understood, not only the cultural differences between England and India, but the emotional and psychological differences too.

When the lama speaks of "the red mist of affection" that he feels for Kim, he admits publicly to something no Englishman of the time could possibly have uttered. In Victorian times, the English did not feel publicly, and yet *Kim* is a book in which emotion is visible everywhere. It is a book where people not only feel openly, but where they even go further and act upon their emotional convictions. After all, it's a book that allows a boy to like an old man and an old man to like a boy, frankly and genuinely, without any taint of the suspicion that would inevitably enter into the relationship, say, of an English boy and one of his schoolmasters. Complications and innuendos never occur here; the story adds up to one of simple adventure, an adventure that brings together two people wandering through the East, each searching for a personal goal, each with a special quest. Ultimately they both find what they seek, but, alas, as soon as they do, they lose their identities and become something else. Kim becomes a sahib, the lama goes off into the blue. Success spells the end of the adventure; it dissolves the relationship at the very heart of

the story and brings to an end the artist's flight of fancy. If one is looking for a message here, one can find it, and it, like the adventure, is a simple one. Kipling is surely saying that this is a brief life, but in its brevity it offers us some splendid moments, some meaningful adventures. Savor the moments as they come, he tells us, enjoy the adventures, relish freedom while you have it, and perhaps most of all, cultivate meaningful relationships.

Some critics say that *Kim* is shapeless, that it has no object at all really, that it is merely a catalog of impressions. Others admit that it is a great book, but they cannot satisfactorily explain why this relatively simple tale, told largely in a conventional picaresque style, grips us so.

I would suggest that *Kim* is certainly a novel because it tells a well-structured story with a beginning, a middle, and an end; because characters are sharply delineated; because their motives are believable. But *Kim* is more than just a novel because it inhabits artistic terrain that most novels do not reach: it possesses a mystical quality that accounts for its exceptional power, a quality that its creator weaves subtly into its fabric—it may even be the thread that holds the tapestry together—and it manifests itself in more than one way.

Certainly *Kim* is mystical in that it captures the suggestive elements of the exotic East, not only the strange, striking landscape, but the soul of the East as well, first in the deep religion of the lama and in the way that faith shapes his character, and second, in the nature of the Eastern persona, the character and personality of the Easterner as opposed to the Westerner.

But the mystical element lives here on another level too, as it does in most of Kipling's other works. For Kipling himself was something of a mystic. He believed that his creative powers, his inspiration came to him mysteriously and miraculously through some awesome, unknowable process. Very likely he associated the elements of the inscrutable, mysterious East with the mystical qualities of his own creative imagination. He believed in both strongly: "You didn't write *She*, and I didn't write 'Recessional,'" Kipling once said to Rider Haggard. "Something wrote them through us." In his brief biographical essay, *Something of Myself*, Kipling tells us that *Kim* "grew like the Djinn released from the brass bottle, and the more we explored its possibilities the more opulence of detail did

we discover." And, he adds, we recall, "Kim took care of himself."

There is something mystical, as well, about the authorial voice, the teller's "glittering eye," as it were. We see the strange land of India through the mind of Kim, who, though technically British, is essentially Indian. The language that Kipling produces is a language that no Briton would speak: it is a foreign language transliterated into English; or, if it isn't, Kipling has the knack of making us believe it is. And the same applies to the way of seeing, the way of feeling, the very essence of being: it is all foreign and it is all credible. It is so convincing that it stuns even Indians. Nirad C. Chaudhuri writes that *Kim* is "not only the finest novel in the English language with an Indian theme, but also one of the greatest of English novels." Kipling, for him, "stands supreme among Western writers for his treatment of the biggest reality in India . . . the life of people and religion in the twin setting of the mountains and the plain." Most writers condense and capsulize; Kipling expands, enlarges. For Chaudhuri, Kipling's vision is "of a much bigger India" than meets the outward, casual eye, "a vision whose profundity we Indians would be hard put to it to match even in an Indian language, not to speak of English. He had arrived at a true and moving sense of that India which is almost timeless, and had come to love it. . . . We Indians shall never cease to be grateful to Kipling for having shown the many faces of our country in all their beauty, power, and truth."

We should also remember that *Kim* was written by a poet, that it is a story that only a poet could devise. Only the poet, with his sense of wonder at human experience and especially human feelings, the poet with his extraterrestrial vibrations, with his innate sense of proportion and beauty, with his sense of balance, cadence, and pulse, with his intrinsic knowledge of right measures—only the poet could create a book like *Kim*.

In a sense, Kim's quest is everyone's: the quest for identity, the quest for selfhood. It is a universal theme, as evident in Wilhelm Meister and David Copperfield before Kim, as in Holden Caulfield after him. And, in the end, the quest is more important than the discovery. The quest involves reaching out, searching, and by reaching out and searching, the boy is shaped into the man. There is more meaning in trial than there is in triumph. The knowable, the definable, is dross;

the real worth of life is entangled in the unknowable, the magical, the mystical.

Some have argued that *Kim* is an imperialist tract, depicting the clash between white and black, the struggle between the rulers and the ruled. Some even think it is a sinister book, an enchanting tale to illustrate that "whiteness will out," that white is better than yellow, brown, or black, and that British white is best of all. Kipling is often accused of having been the Cecil Rhodes of English literature. Those who do not read beyond the first line of "The Ballad of East and West" see Kipling as a jingoist. But that view is simply false; he deserves a more nearly accurate characterization.

Kipling's philosophy grew out of a private morality. He believed that he knew how both individuals and nations, especially the British and Britain, must behave, and he expressed his belief in some of his most controversial work, especially in poems like "Recessional" (1897) and "The White Man's Burden" (1899). The doctrine of hard work was a cornerstone of Kipling's faith, as was his firm belief in "the Law," both the law of nature and the law of the state. He found democracy uncongenial because he did not believe that ignorant or poorly informed voters should be allowed to elect ill-equipped representatives to run a government by trial and error. He admired highly schooled specialists, and he believed that running governments, like waging wars or manning ocean liners, required specialists. He was predictably horrified by what he regarded as twentieth-century socialist trends. But he was a sensitive man, and a kind one and, above all, valued the sanctity of the human heart and believed deeply in human goodness.

Kipling suffered most because he was demonstrably patriotic in an age when patriotism soured. Contemporaries damned his conservative politics, and historians wrote of him as a political hack when, in fact, he was far more artistic than worldly.

Before the turn of the century, he was more popular and more quoted than most writers. He understood the lower social strata of humanity and could make them live and breathe in his works, even as he managed to appeal to a lower-class sensibility. These facts, more than his politics, brought the critics' sneers down upon him. Because he often wrote about common people, critics judged him and his work common; because he portrayed so well the coarseness of English high

society, they thought him an upstart; because he could capture the ragged speech and dialects of the babu and cockney, they accused him of lacking refinement and of being cursed with a tin ear.

But while ordinary critics sneered, the great and the gifted valued Kipling. For T. S. Eliot, Kipling was "the greatest English man of letters of his generation," and for W. Somerset Maugham, "the best short-story writer that our country can boast of."

Posterity is the sternest judge of all, and the fact that Kipling's works, and most particularly, *Kim*, are still read by young and old the world over is evidence enough that the little, bespectacled man who wrote speeches for King George V and Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, but who refused a title when it was offered him, has made his mark in his own way, by the sweat of his artistic brow.