

RUDYARD KIPLING

Short Stories: 1

**A SAHIBS' WAR
AND OTHER STORIES**

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*Selected by
Andrew Rutherford*



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Preface

THESE two volumes of short stories* are selected from the following five collections, which have been made available to Penguin Books by Macmillan and Co. Ltd: *Traffics and Discoveries* (1904), *Actions and Reactions* (1909), *A Diversity of Creatures* (1917), *Debits and Credits* (1926) and *Limits and Renewals* (1932). These comprise the best of Kipling's prose fiction after 1900, apart from *Kim* (1901) and the short stories collected in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910).

Kipling's fiction is characteristically a rich blend of invention with experience, his own or others'; and his autobiography, *Something of Myself* (1937), suggests origins for many of these tales. 'A Sahibs' War' and 'The Captive' both derive from his first-hand knowledge of British and Boer practice in South Africa; 'Little Foxes' was based on an anecdote told him by an officer who had been Master of the original 'Gihon Hunt'; 'Regulus' draws on recollections of his own schooldays at Westward Ho!; a barmaid seen in Auckland, and a petty officer's remarks overheard in a train near Cape Town, were the starting points for 'Mrs Bathurst'; his interest in Freemasonry ('In the Interests of the Brethren') dates from his induction to the multi-racial, multi-religious Lodge at Lahore in 1885; in a house at Torquay, formerly inhabited by three old maids, he and his wife had felt in 1896 'a growing depression which enveloped us both - a gathering blackness of mind and sorrow of the heart', which he attributed to the Spirit of the house itself, and recreated in the symptoms which afflict his characters in 'The House Surgeon'; while his experiences at Bateman's, their eventual home in Sussex, provided the technicalities of 'Below the

* *A Sahibs' War and Other Stories* and *Friendly Brook and Other Stories*.

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Mill Dam' and the insights into rural life and character which he drew on in stories like 'Friendly Brook', 'My Son's Wife', and 'An Habitation Enforced'.

Deeper emotional levels are suggested by Charles Carrington's official but less reticent biography, *Rudyard Kipling: His Life and Work* (1955). Behind the delicate pathos of 'They', for example, lies Kipling's grief at the death of his little daughter Josephine in 1899; and although 'Mary Postgate' was written before his only son was killed at Loos in 1915, our knowledge of his loss gives added poignancy to a story like 'The Gardener'. Such information, however, is not necessary for our understanding and enjoyment of the tales themselves; and further speculation would run counter to Kipling's own request (in 'The Appeal') that his art be judged impersonally, and his privacy respected posthumously as he made sure it was in his own lifetime:

If I have given you delight
By aught that I have done,
Let me lie quiet in that night
Which shall be yours anon:

And for the little, little, span
The dead are borne in mind,
Seek not to question other than
The books I leave behind.

This selection from five of the books he left behind presents the twentieth-century Kipling who developed from the more familiar prodigy of the eighties and nineties; and it illustrates the range, variety, and technical originality of his fiction of this period.* There are fewer tales of Empire than the popular stereotype of Kipling might lead readers to expect: as 'Little Foxes' demonstrates, he still held firmly the

*The poems which accompany the stories in these collections have not been included (though they are always thematically relevant), except in the case of 'MacDonough's Song', which is quoted and referred to in 'As Easy as A.B.C.', and must be regarded as an essential element of the story itself.

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ideals and prejudices which had inspired much of his work in the previous two decades, but the general incompetence revealed by the Boer War diminished his confidence in Britain's ability to sustain her imperial role, while her very will to do so, or even to prepare to defend herself against hostile European powers, was being sapped, it seemed to him, by decadence and political irresponsibility. Increasingly, therefore, he was preoccupied by the condition of England herself, as he rebuked her blindness, folly and complacency, and sought reassurance in groups, types, or individuals who might still redeem her backslidings. Simultaneously, he found himself involved in a fascinating process of discovery, for the countryside, its people and traditions, came as a revelation to him once he settled in Sussex: 'England,' he wrote to a friend in 1902, 'is a wonderful land. It is the most marvellous of all foreign countries that I have ever been in.' Yet even while making it peculiarly his own, he was aware (as 'Below the Mill Dam' shows) of the baneful influence of inert tradition, and the need for technological advance. For socially parasitic intellectuals, especially those of 'the Immoderate Left', he felt the savage contempt expressed in 'My Son's Wife'; but his fable of decadence in 'The Mother Hive' goes beyond this sectional antagonism to diagnose moral-political sickness in a whole community, while the suspicion of democracy which he shared with so many major authors of the century is projected into an ambiguously Utopian future in 'As Easy as A.B.C.'. Such public themes bulk large in Volume 1, as his preoccupation with the Great War does in Volume 2; but these coexist with more personal, more psychological, and more spiritual interests, especially in his later years. Individual human beings, their characters, their actions, their behaviour under stress, remain his main concern; and using a remarkable variety of settings and of *dramatis personae*, he offers stories on a characteristic range of themes - stories of revenge, seen sometimes as wild justice, sometimes as an almost pathological obsession; stories of forgiveness, human and divine; stories of the super-

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natural, to be taken now literally, now symbolically, but never trivially as mere spine-chilling entertainment; stories of hatred and cruelty, but stories also of compassion and of love; stories of work, of craftsmanship, of artistry; of comradeship and isolation; and stories of healing, sometimes physical, but more often moral, spiritual or psychological.

Technically, his fiction shows a comparable variety, but for modern readers the most interesting development is probably his evolution of that complex, closely organized, elliptical and symbolic mode of writing which ranks him as an unexpected contributor to 'modernism' and a major innovator in the art of the short story. This mode, with its obliquities and ironies, its multiple levels of meaning, and what have been described by Miss J. M. S. Tompkins as its 'complexities of substance and . . . of method', was first attempted in 'Mrs Bathurst' and 'They', but is to be found fully developed in his later stories, especially those dated from 1924 onwards in Volume 2 of this selection. Detailed discussion of this and other aspects of his artistry may be found in such studies as J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Art of Rudyard Kipling* (1959); C. A. Bodelsen, *Aspects of Kipling's Art* (1964); *Kipling's Mind and Art*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (1964); and Bonamy Dobrée, *Rudyard Kipling: Realist and Fabulist* (1967).

ANDREW RUTHERFORD

A Sahibs' War

(1901)

PASS? Pass? Pass? I have one pass already, allowing me to go by the *rél* from Kroonstadt to Eshtellenbosch, where the horses are, where I am to be paid off, and whence I return to India. I am a – trooper of the Gurgaon Rissala (cavalry regiment), the One Hundred and Forty-first Punjab Cavalry. Do not herd me with these black Kaffirs. I am a Sikh – a trooper of the State. The Lieutenant-Sahib does not understand my talk? Is there *any* Sahib on this train who will interpret for a trooper of the Gurgaon Rissala going about his business in this devil's devising of a country, where there is no flour, no oil, no spice, no red pepper, and no respect paid to a Sikh? Is there no help? . . . God be thanked, here is such a Sahib! Protector of the Poor! Heaven-born! Tell the young Lieutenant-Sahib that my name is Umr Singh; I am – I was – servant to Kurban Sahib, now dead; and I have a pass to go to Eshtellenbosch, where the horses are. Do not let him herd me with these black Kaffirs! . . . Yes, I will sit by this truck till the Heaven-born has explained the matter to the young Lieutenant-Sahib who does not understand our tongue.

What orders? The young Lieutenant-Sahib will not detain me? Good! I go down to Eshtellenbosch by the next *terain*? Good! I go with the Heaven-born? Good! Then for this day I am the Heaven-born's servant. Will the Heaven-born bring the honour of his presence to a seat? Here is an empty truck; I will spread my blanket over one corner thus – for the sun is hot, though not so hot as our Punjab in May. I will prop it up thus, and I will arrange this hay thus, so the Presence can sit at ease till God sends us a *terain* for Eshtellenbosch . . .

The Presence knows the Punjab? Lahore? Amritsar? Attaree, belike? My village is north over the fields three miles

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from Attaree, near the big white house which was copied from a certain place of the Great Queen's by - by - I have forgotten the name. Can the Presence recall it? Sirdar Dyal Singh Attareewalla! Yes, that is the very man; but how does the Presence know? Born and bred in Hind, was he? O-o-oh! This is quite a different matter. The Sahib's nurse was a Surtee woman from the Bombay side? That was a pity. She should have been an up-country wench; for those make stout nurses. There is no land like the Punjab. There are no people like the Sikhs. Umr Singh is my name, yes. An old man? Yes. A trooper only after all these years? Ye-es. Look at my uniform, if the Sahib doubts. Nay - nay; the Sahib looks too closely. All marks of rank were picked off it long ago, but - but it is true - mine is not a common cloth such as troopers use for their coats, and - the Sahib has sharp eyes - that black mark is such a mark as a silver chain leaves when long worn on the breast. The Sahib says that troopers do not wear silver chains? No-o. Troopers do not wear the Arder of Beritish India? No. The Sahib should have been in the Police of the Punjab. I am not a trooper, but I have been a Sahib's servant for nearly a year - bearer, butler, sweeper, any and all three. The Sahib says that Sikhs do not take menial service? True; but it was for Kurban Sahib - my Kurban Sahib - dead these three months!

Young - of a reddish face - with blue eyes, and he lilted a little on his feet when he was pleased, and cracked his finger-joints. So did his father before him, who was Deputy-Commissioner of Jullundur in my father's time when I rode with the Gurgaon Rissala. My father? Jwala Singh. A Sikh of Sikhs - he fought against the English at Sobraon and carried the mark to his death. So we were knit as it were by a blood-tie, I and my Kurban Sahib. Yes, I was a trooper first - nay, I had risen to a Lance-Duffadar, I remember - and my father gave me a dun stallion of his own breeding on that day; and *he* was a little baba, sitting upon a wall by the parade-ground with his ayah - all in white, Sahib - laughing at the end of our drill. And his father and mine talked together, and mine

beckoned to me, and I dismounted, and the baba put his hand into mine – eighteen – twenty-five – twenty-seven years gone now – Kurban Sahib – my Kurban Sahib! Oh, we were great friends after that! He cut his teeth on my sword-hilt, as the saying is. He called me Big Umr Singh – Buwwa Umwa Singh, for he could not speak plain. He stood only this high, Sahib, from the bottom of this truck, but he knew all our troopers by name – every one. . . . And he went to England, and he became a young man, and back he came, liting a little in his walk, and cracking his finger-joints – back to his own regiment and to me. He had not forgotten either our speech or our customs. He was a Sikh at heart, Sahib. He was rich, open-handed, just, a friend of poor troopers, keen-eyed, jestful, and careless. *I* could tell tales about him in his first years. There was very little he hid from *me*. I was his Umr Singh, and when we were alone he called me Father, and I called him Son. Yes, that was how we spoke. We spoke freely together on everything – about war, and women, and money, and advancement, and such all.

We spoke about this war, too, long before it came. There were many box-wallahs, pedlars, with Pathans a few, in this country, notably at the city of Yunasbagh (Johannesburg), and they sent news in every week how the Sahibs lay without weapons under the heel of the Boer-log; and how big guns were hauled up and down the streets to keep Sahibs in order; and how a Sahib called Eger Sahib (Edgar?) was killed for a jest by the Boer-log. The Sahib knows how we of Hind hear all that passes over the earth? There was not a gun cocked in Yunasbagh that the echo did not come into Hind in a month. The Sahibs are very clever, but they forget their own cleverness has created the *dak* (the post), and that for an anna or two all things become known. We of Hind listened and heard and wondered; and when it was a sure thing, as reported by the pedlars and the vegetable-sellers, that the Sahibs of Yunasbagh lay in bondage to the Boer-log, certain among us asked questions and waited for signs. Others of us mistook the meaning of those signs. *Wherefore, Sahib, came the long war in the Tirah!* This Kurban Sahib knew, and we

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talked together. He said, 'There is no haste. Presently we shall fight, and we shall fight for all Hind in that country round Yunasbagh.' Here he spoke truth. Does the Sahib not agree? Quite so. It is for Hind that the Sahibs are fighting this war. Ye cannot in one place rule and in another bear service. Either ye must everywhere rule or everywhere obey. God does not make the nations ringstraked. True - true - true!

So did matters ripen - a step at a time. It was nothing to me, except I think - and the Sahib sees this, too? - that it is foolish to make an army and break their hearts in idleness. Why have they not sent for the men of the Tochi - the men of the Tirah - the men of Buner? Folly, a thousand times. *We* could have done it all so gently - so gently.

Then, upon a day, Kurban Sahib sent for me and said, 'Ho, Dada, I am sick, and the doctor gives me a certificate for many months.' And he winked, and I said, 'I will get leave and nurse thee, Child. Shall I bring my uniform?' He said, 'Yes, and a sword for a sick man to lean on. We go to Bombay, and thence by sea to the country of the Hubshis (niggers).' Mark his cleverness! He was first of all our men among the native regiments to get leave for sickness and to come here. Now they will not let our officers go away, sick or well, except they sign a bond not to take part in this war-game upon the road. But *he* was clever. There was no whisper of war when he took his sick-leave. I came also? Assuredly. I went to my Colonel, and sitting in the chair (I am - I was - of that rank for which a chair is placed when we speak with the Colonel) I said, 'My child goes sick. Give me leave, for I am old and sick also.'

And the Colonel, making the word double between English and our tongue, said, 'Yes, thou art truly *Sikh*', and he called me an old devil - jestingly, as one soldier may jest with another; and he said my Kurban Sahib was a liar as to his health (that was true, too), and at long last he stood up and shook my hand, and bade me go and bring my Sahib safe again. My Sahib back again - aie me!

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So I went to Bombay with Kurban Sahib, but there, at sight of the Black Water, Wajib Ali, his bearer, checked, and said that his mother was dead. Then I said to Kurban Sahib, 'What is one Mussulman pig more or less? Give me the keys of the trunks, and I will lay out the white shirts for dinner.' Then I beat Wajib Ali at the back of Watson's Hotel, and that night I prepared Kurban Sahib's razors. I say, Sahib, that I, a Sikh of the Khalsa, an unshorn man, prepared the razors. But I did not put on my uniform while I did it. On the other hand, Kurban Sahib took for me, upon the steamer, a room in all respects like to his own, and would have given me a servant. We spoke of many things on the way to this country; and Kurban Sahib told me what he perceived would be the conduct of the war. He said, 'They have taken men afoot to fight men ahorse, and they will foolishly show mercy to these Boer-log because it is believed that they are white.' He said, 'There is but one fault in this war, and that is that the Government have not employed *us*, but have made it altogether a Sahibs' war. Very many men will thus be killed, and no vengeance will be taken.' True talk – true talk! It fell as Kurban Sahib foretold.

And we came to this country, even to Cape Town over yonder, and Kurban Sahib said, 'Bear the baggage to the big dak-bungalow, and I will look for employment fit for a sick man.' I put on the uniform of my rank and went to the big dak-bungalow, called Maun Nihâl Seyn,* and I caused the heavy baggage to be bestowed in that dark lower place – is it known to the Sahib? – which was already full of the swords and baggage of officers. It is fuller now – dead men's kit all! I was careful to secure a receipt for all three pieces. I have it in my belt. They must go back to the Punjab.

Anon came Kurban Sahib, liking a little in his step, which sign I knew, and he said, 'We are born in a fortunate hour. We go to Eshtellenbosch to oversee the dispatch of horses.' Remember, Kurban Sahib was squadron-leader of the Curgaon Rissala, and I was Umr Singh. So I said, speaking as we

* Mount Nelson?

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do - we did - when none was near, 'Thou art a groom and I am a grass-cutter, but is this any promotion, Child?' At this he laughed, saying, 'It is the way to better things. Have patience, Father.' (Aye, he called me father when none were by.) 'This war ends not tomorrow nor the next day. I have seen the new Sahibs,' he said, 'and they are fathers of owls - all - all - all!'

So we went to Eshtellenbosch, where the horses are; Kurban Sahib doing the service of servants in that business. And the whole business was managed without forethought by new Sahibs from God knows where, who had never seen a tent pitched or a peg driven. They were full of zeal, but empty of all knowledge. Then came, little by little from Hind, those Pathans - they are just like those vultures up there, Sahib - they always follow slaughter. And there came to Eshtellenbosch some Sikhs - Muzbees, though - and some Madras monkey-men. They came with horses. Puttiala sent horses. Jhind and Nabha sent horses. All the nations of the Khalsa sent horses. All the ends of the earth sent horses. God knows what the army did with them, unless they ate them raw. They used horses as a courtesan uses oil: with both hands. These horses needed many men. Kurban Sahib appointed me to the command (what a command for me!) of certain woolly ones - *Hubshis* - whose touch and shadow are pollution. They were enormous eaters; sleeping on their bellies; laughing without cause; wholly like animals. Some were called Fingoes, and some, I think, Red Kaffirs, but they were all Kaffirs - filth unspeakable. I taught them to water and feed, and sweep and rub down. Yes, I oversaw the work of sweepers - a *jemadar* of *mehtars* (headman of a refuse-gang) was I, and Kurban Sahib little better, for five months. Evil months! The war went as Kurban Sahib had said. Our new men were slain and no vengeance was taken. It was a war of fools armed with the weapons of magicians. Guns that slew at half a day's march, and men who, being new, walked blind into high grass and were driven off like cattle by the Bocr-log! As to the city of Eshtellenbosch, I am not a Sahib - only