<center>**"The Hun Is at the Gate":**</center>

<center>**Rudyard Kipling's Poetry of the First World War**</center>

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History, in every sense, is the central subject in Kipling's mature work. In his early, Indian period, he describes a limited social milieu—and those tales of the flirtations of officers and the sufferings of common soldiers help create the modern short story. As time goes on, however, Kipling comes more and more to see the individual as part of a larger story, one that has been developing through the ages. In the children's books Puck of Pook's Hill and Rewards and Fairies, he probes the roots of English culture, with its various strands of Roman, Saxon, and Norman. In many poems and stories intended for adult audiences, he both commented on the events that were shaping the history of his time and used the history of earlier ages as the vehicle through which those events might be understood.

Some of Kipling's most interesting poems are the products of the First World War. Kipling had, like many others, expected a war with Germany, and when the war came, he threw himself into the cause, writing a number of ephemeral works on the Army and Navy as well as some powerful stories. The war became a personal calamity, as well as a public cause, in 1915, when Kipling's only son John was reported missing during the battle of Loos. The young officer, who was just 18 and going into action for the first time, was probably killed and buried by a shell. His body was never recovered. The public poems are fascinating rhetorical documents, and they become even more interesting when read alongside the poems in which Kipling seems to be dealing with his private grief. In all of them, Kipling recalls earlier historical events to make sense of both his country's agony—and his own family's loss.

Several poems make the traditional identification between England and Ancient Roman. This identification has, of course, a long history. Since the Middle Ages,

Englishmen have thought themselves the heirs of Rome—even of Troy. The origin myth that we find in Layamon's <u>Brut</u> and in the opening of <u>Sir</u> <u>Gawain</u> <u>and</u> <u>the</u> <u>Green</u> <u>Knight</u>, makes the founders of Britain the heirs of Aeneas. We are still accustomed to the identification of Britain and Rome from Hollywood movies, such as <u>Ben-Hur</u>, where the Romans are played by British actors and the Hebrews by Americans. (From the time of the Puritans, of course, we Americans have thought of ourselves as the second chosen people.) One of the things that makes Kipling's use of the Roman analogue for England so interesting is the <u>period</u> of Roman history he chooses. He is attracted not to the mythical Rome of Aeneas, nor to the heyday of the Republic or the empire. He sees the model for modern England in the waning Empire, where the badly-supported legionnaires defend civilization against the hordes of barbarian invaders. It is the Roman frontier of that period that he describes in "Puck of Pook's Hill." And in a poem that shaped the language of the war, Kipling identified the German armies pouring into Belgium and France with the barbarian tribes who swept down from Germania on Rome.

On September 2, 1914, <u>The</u> <u>Times</u> published Kipling's poem "For All We Have and Are." The news from every front was bad—and if it had not been heavily censored, the news would have been much worse. The first few weeks of the war had seen Liège, Brussels, Lille, and Amiens overrun. There was a real fear that Paris would fall. Kipling issued a call to arms:

> For all we have and are,
> For all our children's fate,
> Stand up and take the war.
> The Hun is at the gate!
> Our world has passed away,
> In wantonness o'erthrown.
> There is nothing left today
> But steel and fire and stone!
> > Though all we knew depart,
> > The old Commandments stand:—
> > "In courage keep you heart,
> > In strength lift up your hand." (<u>Verse</u> 328)

"The Hun" quickly became one of the common epithets for the enemy, but it is worth considering why Kipling would choose to identify the Germans with the Huns. It might seem strange to envision the enemy as one of the waves of attackers who swept down on a doomed empire—it might seem even defeatist to cast one's own nation in the role of the vanquished just when it must summon all its resources to avoid the old empire's fate. (Or he may have remembered—as W.H. Auden did in his poem "An Encounter"—that unlike the Vandals and the Goths, the Huns turned back.) But the Roman analogue serves two of Kipling's purposes. First, it does attack the English. This poem, like many jeremiads over the centuries, describes the external threat to a civilization as the result of the civilization's own internal weakness. Kipling had seen England as foolishly unprepared for the war to come—especially since the Boer War had shown so dramatically the incompetence and inefficiency of parts of the British army. He wants to cast England in the role of the decadent, luxurious Rome that had become too effete to repel the invaders. The accusation is meant to call forth a reform.

But there is another aspect of Rome that Kipling wants to evoke as well. Rome can be envisioned as a decadent civilization or as a cruel despotism. But it can just as easily been seen as the embodiment of order and of law. (Here in Scotland we are beyond the last outpost of the Roman legions: but I understand that some Scots are proud that their legal system is based on the Code of Roman Law, not on the incoherent grab-bag of precedents the English call the Common Law.) For Kipling, England as Rome represents law as opposed to simple force. In the same poem he writes,

> Once more we hear the word
> That sickened earth of old:—
> "No law except the sword
> Unsheathed and uncontrolled."
> Once more it knits mankind,
> Once more the nations go
> To meet and break and bind
> A crazed and driven foe.

For Kipling the Germans who have violated the neutrality of Belgium are a lawless horde, just like the Vandals and the Huns. His call to arms quite naturally invokes the great Western European archetype of the collapse of civilization.

Kipling uses the Roman analogue in some other First World War poems. "A Recantation" describes a music-hall singer who "goes on with her work for the boys' sake" even on the night she receives the news of her own son's death—and Kipling claimed that the story "was not fiction" (War Stories 360). But Kipling transfers this story, with its references to his own son's death, from London and France to Rome and Gaul, and he gives his singer a classical name, Lyde.

> Ere certain Fate had touched a heart
>   By fifty years made cold,
> I judged thee, Lyde, and thy art
>   O'erblown and over-bold.
>
> But he—but he, of whom bereft
>   I suffer vacant days—
> He on his shield not meanly left—
>   He cherished all thy lays.
>
> Witness the magic coffer stocked
>   With convoluted runes
> Wherein thy very voice was locked
>   And linked to circling tunes.

(The transformation of the Victrola into something ancient works well.)

> Witness thy portrait, smoke-defiled,
>   That decked his shelter-place.
> Life seemed more present, wrote the child,
>   Beneath thy well-known face.
>
> And when the grudging days restored
>   Him for a breath to home
> He, with fresh crowds of youth, adored
>   Thee making mirth at Rome.
>
> Therefore, I humble, join the host,
>   Loyal and loud, who bow
> To thee as Queen of Song—and ghosts,

> For I remember how
>
> Never more rampant rose the Hall
> > At thy audacious line
> Than when the news came in from Gaul
> > Thy son had—followed mine.
>
> But thou didst hide it in thy breast
> > And, capering, took the brunt
> Of blaze and blare, and launched the jest
> > That swept next week the Front.

The Roman trappings of this poem perhaps serve a purpose beyond those in "For All We Have and Are." They serve to distance the story of loss from Kipling himself. Dealing with the death of a son must be hard for any man, but for Kipling grief presented a special problem. His stoic view of manhood left hardly any room for the open expression of grief: "IF—" tells us that to "be a man, my son" you must be able to lose everything and still "never breath a word about your loss" (Verse 578). Yet, from his earliest work, grief is a constant subject. In "A Recantation," as in several other works, Kipling both acknowledges grief and celebrates its repression. The music hall singer wins his admiration not just because his lost son idolized her, but because she can carry on in her work despite her own loss. The singer becomes the image of the poet: they both must carry on in their work despite a devastating loss:

> Singer to children! Ours possessed
> > Sleep before noon—but thee,
> Wakeful each midnight for the rest,
> > No holocaust shall free!
>
> Yet they who use the Word assigned,
> > To hearten and make whole,
> None less than Gods have served mankind,
> > Though vultures rend their soul.

The performer's jokes and songs—like Kipling's own stories, poems, and finally his History of the Irish Guards in the Great War—are work that needs to be done, despite any grief or loss.

"A Recantation" is part of another pattern in Kipling's response to the war and the loss he suffered, in that it focuses on a woman. In his two most powerful stories of loss, "Mary Postgate" and "The Gardener," Kipling takes the sort of person who can openly express grief—a woman—and then provides external reasons why she cannot grieve openly. In other words, he uses female figures to objectify his situation as a father: feeling grief but unable to express it. Kipling also makes a bereft woman his focus in several poems. "My Boy Jack," published in a pamphlet on the Navy in 1916, is the dialogue between two voices, a mother's voice and what we can only call a male voice:

> "Have you news of my boy Jack?"
>   Not his tide.
> "When d'you think he'll come back?"
>   Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.
>
> "Has anyone else had word of him?"
>   Not this tide.
> For what is sunk will hardly swim,
>   Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.
>
> "Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?"
>   None this tide,
>   Nor any tide,
> Except he did not shame his kind—
>   Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.
>
> Then hold your head up all the more,
>   This tide,
>   And every tide;
> Because he was the son you bore,
>   And gave to that wind blowing and that tide! (Verse 216-17)

The male voice takes the poem over completely in the final stanza, and one can hardly feel that the mother has received any consolation. She might even doubt that "gave" is the word to use when describing the loss of a son in battle. Kipling himself often, either in pride or anger, talked about his generation haven <u>given</u> its sons; and the consolation he takes when reporting his son's death to a friend is simply, "It's something to have bred a

man" (Carrrington 509). But other poems suggest he himself longed to see some greater meaning in the sacrifice than giving a man to stand against the tide of barbarism.

In several poems, Kipling uses Biblical history, not Roman, as the analogue for the war. In "A Nativity," Kipling deals with the same irony many others have seen at Christmastime during war: the promise of peace is manifestly not yet fulfilled. Hardy put it most grimly,

> "Peace on Earth," we said. We sing it,
> And pay a million priests to bring it.
> And after two thousand years of mass
> We've got as far as poison-gas. (914)

But Kipling will not present such a bleak vision. Again using a woman as the embodiment of mourning, he invokes Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Shunammite woman whose dead son is raised by Elisha. The speaker envies the Virgin Mary in that she knows why her child dies—the herald angels and the Wise Men have made the purpose of his life clear—and even more in that the Blessed Mother "saw him die / And took him when he died" (218). As centuries of pietàs make clear, Christ's body was not lost to his mother. Kipling identifies with Mary Magdalene, as in "The Gardener," because she finds only an empty tomb and knows "not where he is laid." But the poem returns over and over to the mother who can answer Elisha's question, "Is it well with the child? Is it well?" (2 Kings 4:26) with the trusting answer "It is well—it is well with the child" (Verse 218), even though she knows that he is dead. The poem is finally not a great success both because of its wobbly focus—the juxtaposition of the three women becomes confusing—and because, unlike most of Kipling's poems from the war, it does not recognize how terrible the sacrifice has been and seems perfectly certain that it has not been made in vain.

One of Kipling's most powerful poems on the war works by identifying the soldier with Christ. Here the focus is not on the survivor's grief, but on the sacrifice itself. The Jesus evoked here is not the superman of John's gospel—who never stumbles

beneath his cross and asks, "the cup that my father has given me, shall I not drink it?"

(John 18:11); it is, instead, the more fully human Jesus of Luke, who sweats blood in his

agony in the garden of Gethsemane and prays, "Father, if thou be willing, remove this

cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

> The Garden called Gethsemane,
>   In Picardy it was,
> And there the people came to see
>   The English soldiers pass.
> We used to pass—we used to pass
>   Or halt, as it might be,
> And ship our masks in case of gas
>   Beyond Gethsemane.
>
> The Garden called Gethsemane,
>   It held a pretty lass,
> But all the time she talked to me
>   I prayed my cup might pass.
> The officer sat on the chair,
>   The men lay on the grass,
> And all the time we halted there
>   I prayed my cup might pass.
>
> It didn't pass—it didn't pass—
>   It didn't pass form me.
> I drank it when we met the gas
>   Beyond Gethsemane! (Verse 98)

T.S. Eliot admired this poem, though he affected not to understand it (16). It is, in fact,

clear enough. Here Kipling sees the death of the soldier as not just a part of the struggle

of beleaguered civilization against barbarism. He sees it as part of the cosmic struggle of

good against evil, for the soldier is cast into the role of Christ Himself. The identification

was a common one, especially during and after the First World War, and it is not entirely

inappropriate. The soldier, like Christ himself, dies for others and both willingly lays

down his life and has it taken from him.

Perhaps Kipling's most powerful response to the war draws on neither Roman nor

biblical history, but on ancient Greece. The "Epitaphs of the War" are a wonderfully rich

and varied collection. Eliot called them some of the few truly good epigrams in English. Like all English epitaphs, they are modeled on the <u>Greek</u> <u>Anthology</u>. Simonides' epitaph on the Spartans at Thermopylae echoes in the minds of all English poets—in fact of all European poets in all ages. (Even Americans recall it: think of the Burt Lancaster movie on Vietnam: <u>Go</u> <u>Tell</u> <u>the</u> <u>Spartans</u>.) But the Greek model was even more in the mind of English poets during the First World War because of the tragic campaign at Gallipoli, where British and Australian soldiers died near the battlefields where their Greek, Persian, and even Trojan predecessors perished. Several fine poems by participants in the battle—such as Patrick Shaw-Stewart's "I Saw a Man this Morning"—took the ancient Greek texts as a model. (It would not have been hard to cast the English in the role of the free little states of Greece and the Turks and their German allies as the Persian despots, but that rarely happened: more often the echoes went all the way back to the endless—and pointless—siege of Troy.) In any case, Kipling, too heard the echoes. One of the epitaphs is explicitly on the Gallipoli campaign: it is entitled "Salonikan Grave."

But speaking in the voice of the dead—or in the laconic voice of the memorial stone—allowed Kipling to address many aspects, not just of the war, but of human existence. Some of the poems in the collection are the sort of celebrations of the Army that Kipling had been writing since his early days in India. The speakers in "Ex-Clerk" and "The Wonder" do not lament the life they have lost: they celebrate the life of strength the army gave them. Others, such as "Raped and Revenged," show the thirst for vengeance that is so common in Kipling's work—though, interestingly, less so after his son's death. But many of the epitaphs are either touching mediations on loss or explorations of what makes human identity.

We cannot say that any of these epitaphs is on John Kipling: his father composed the inscription on the tombs of the unknown warriors in all the military cemeteries in France—"Their Name Liveth Forevermore"—but that inscription is not in this collection. There are, however, a number of epitaphs on "<u>A</u> son":

> My son was killed while laughing at some jest. I would I knew
> What it was, and it might serve me in a time when jests are few. (385)

Here is real feeling matched with firm restraint,. Other poems, such as "The Beginner,"

also seem to be describing John Kipling.

> On the first hour of my first day
>> In the front trench I fell.
> (Children in boxes at a play
>> Stand up to watch it well.) (386)

John Kipling died on his first day, but not because he peeped over a parapet.

But the most interesting poems in the collection are those in which the dead are

imagined justifying their lives. Two of these are pendants, each describing an opposing

view of life. In "The Rebel," the speaker attacks the whole order of the universe that has

brought the war about and curses God for it:

> If I had clamoured at Thy Gate
>> For gift of Life on Earth,
> And, thrusting through the souls that wait,
>> Flung headlong into birth—
> Even then, even then, for gin and snare
>> About my pathway spread,
> Lord, I had mocked Thy thoughtful care
>> Before I joined the Dead!
> But now? . . . I was beneath Thy Hand
>> Ere yet the Planets came.
> And now—though Planets pass, I stand
>> The witness to Thy shame! (388)

Had I asked to be born, I could still condemn you for the world I found—but since I was

thrust into the horror unasked and it was all your plan, I condemn you still more deeply. I

wonder, when reading this poem, as I wonder when reading poems like "Gethsemane,"

how far Kipling saw himself in the role of God the Father, who demands the Son's

sacrifice. Under God, it was he and Alice Kipling who brought John to birth and sent

him to the front. Except in poems like this one—which might recall Housman's "Epitaph

on an Army of Mercenaries" in its denunciation of the God who leaves the soldiers to do

his work for him—there is no suggestion he did. In any case, what this poem is about is

an attitude towards life—rebellion—and Kipling presents that attitude vividly. He

matches it with another poem, "The Obedient," that takes the opposite position:

> Daily, though no ears attended,
> > Did my prayers arise.
> Daily, though no fire descended,
> > Did I sacrifice.
> Though my darkness did not lift,
> > Though I faced no lighter odds,
> Though the Gods bestowed no gift,
> > > None the less,
> None the less, I served the Gods! (388)

Here, equally strongly, is Kipling's celebration of duty, which is an identity he finds as

admirable as rebellion. He celebrates such work without hope of reward in many poems,

from "L'Envoi to 'Departmental Ditties'" onward. It is Kipling's version of the sort of

philosophy Camus would popularize: this obedient, like Camus's Sisyphus, finds

meaning in the action, even though it yields no results.

The epitaph on the "Refined Man" is also about the choice of a way of life. It

takes a trivial, embarrassing subject and makes it the emblem of choosing how to live and

die:

> I was of delicate mind. I stepped aside for my needs,
> > Disdaining the common office. I was seen from afar and killed. . .
> How is this matter for mirth? Let each man be judged by his deeds.
> > I have paid my price to live with myself on the terms that I willed.
> (387)

To live on your own terms—whether that means demanding a decent privacy even in the

trenches or something that will seem more serious—often demands far too high a price.

The epitaphs include many other sorts of poems—ironic ones on cowards, bitter

ones on those who died because they were not adequately supported—the "Batteries out

of Ammunition" ask, "If any mourn us in the workshop, say / We died because the shift

keep holiday" (387). It is as if Kipling is trying to capture the whole experience of the

war from the perspective of the dead.

Most interestingly, several of these poems can be read as anti-war poems: one is for a "Dead Statesman"—not an English or a German statesman, just a statesman.

> I could not dig: I dared not rob:
> Therefore I lied to please the mob.
> Now all my lies are proved untrue
> And I must face the men I slew.
> What tale shall serve me here among
> Mine angry and defrauded young? (388)

What answer can he be given? One cannot help wondering if Kipling ever thought that his own support of the war—or the arms build up before it—could be considered one of the lies that brought the young to their death. The question presents itself all the more tellingly when one reads the epitaph entitled "Common Form"

> If any question why we died,
> Tell them, because our fathers lied. (388)

I have never been sure I understood the title of this epitaph: Is "common form" the easy falsehood all repeat? Somehow it seems unlikely, especially since in the tradition of the epitaph the dead tell the truth. Besides, Kipling trusts common sense: "The Gods of the Copy-book Headings" are the ones who tell the truth. In any case, he is willing to at least give voice to the idea that the guilt for all the pointless death lay on his own generation.

Several of Kipling's other war poems can also be read as anti-war pieces. His target was, of course, the mismanagement that cost so many British lives during the First World War. One of his most searing attacks on blundering leaders addresses the disastrous campaign in "Mesopotamia." The defeat of a British army by the Turks was bad enough; the news of the neglect of the sick and wounded was shameful and appalling. Kipling contrasts the men who died with the men who sent them off to battle.

> They shall not return to us, the resolute, the young,
>   The eager and whole-hearted whom we gave:
> But the men who left them thriftily to die in their own dung,
>   Shall they come with years and honour to the grave?
>
> They shall not return to us, the strong men coldly slain

> In sight of help denied from day to day:
> But the men who edged their agonies and chid them in their pain,
> Are they too strong and wise to put away?
>
> . . . .
>
> Their lives cannot repay us—their death could not undo—
> The shame that they have laid upon our race.
> But the slothfulness that wasted and the arrogance that slew,
> Shall we leave it unabated in its place? (298-99)

The language is in some ways very specific to the Mesopotamian campaign: the line about men left "to die in their own dung" reflects reports of dysentery victims being left for days in pools of their own excrement. But in more ways, the poem is a general attack on the war, almost on war itself. The enemy here is not the Hun who was at the gate in 1914. Specifically, it is the incompetent bureaucracy that Kipling saw wasting lives for no good reason. But the reader who did not know the whole context could easily see it as an attack on the whole military institution that sends men off to die. Kipling, of course, would never take that view, much less question that people like himself could legitimately give the lives of their sons. But he lets that view have its voice.

Pacifism, is not, however, the lesson Kipling takes from history. He sees its lesson as the unending need for struggle, for guarding the frontier of civilization against the barbarian. He sees the Romans on the wall facing the Picts, the Greeks defending the pass against the Persians as fighting the same fight as the British troops in France.

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