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LONDON INTERVIEW

STILL HE LIKES US

29 June 1890

LITTLE MORE than a year ago a young man landed in San Francisco from an Indian steamship and almost immediately began to write letters to the most important newspaper in India giving his impressions of our country. If these letters are ever republished in book form, or any other form which will give the great American public a chance to get at them, Rudyard Kipling’s name is Dennis so far as personal popularity in the United States goes. He blazed away at us with a ferocity that throws far into the shade Mrs. Trollope, Dickens and Mac O’Reill combined. After stopping four months in the United States, during which time he experienced a variety of sensations, from a prayer meeting at Chautauqua to an interview with Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling came to London. He was comparatively unknown, though a few of his writings in India had been republished on this side of the water and had attracted attention. To-day his books are piled deep on all the railway news-stands and conspicuously exhibited in shop windows. Rudyard Kipling has leaped at a bound to the very top of the literary ladder. For a time he threatened to eclipse even the ubiquitous Stanley as the lion of the London season. The Times took him up, and with a powerful column-shot landed him at once into the select symposium of “literary fellers” who have been toiling here for years to establish reputations. Edmund Yates wrote him up as a “celebrity” in the World, and while Labouchere in Truth sneered at this as a rather unusual distinction for a “week-old celebrity,” still he admitted that the young novelist was a celebrity.

Following in the footsteps of Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling leaves the sale of his manuscripts and all
other matters strictly pertaining to business to a literary agent, and he has the same agent as had the three novelists I have named—A.P. Watt. This agency plan may have its drawbacks, but it at least gives a man ample scope for uninterrupted work and saves him from innumerable petty annoyances to which he would otherwise be compelled to submit. At all events, it was through the intermediary kindness of Mr. Watt that I was enabled to climb to the summit of a lofty building overlooking the Victoria Embankment and gain admittance to Rudyard Kipling’s “den” when I got there. The junior Kipling had not put in an appearance at the moment, so I had a chance to talk with his father, a thoroughly genial and companionable old gentleman, to whom I explained the object of my visit.

Rudyard Kipling’s workroom has been described, with its soft-tinted Persian rugs, ancient prayer-carpets, dull green paper and pictures of military subjects.

In a few moments Rudyard Kipling entered—a short, broad-shouldered man, with dark-blue dyes. He is rapid of speech and active of movement.

“So you want to interview me about my travels in your country,” he said, after extending a cordial greeting. “Well, I like the people immensely, but in my letters to the Pioneer, in India, I hurled twelve-barrelled curses at the country. I don’t think that Americans ever fully realize the discomforts that a civilized traveller who visits them for the first time is obliged to submit to. Doubtless it is all well enough when you are used to it. I want to go back to America this year if I can. Met some wonderfully nice people there. The Americans are nearer to my life than the English. They resemble our Anglo-Indians in square dealing and frankness of speech. When they have anything to say they say it. I was in America four months. I did not waste my time in trying to “get acquainted,” as you would call it, with celebrities, though of course I did not avoid any of them who came in my way, but I roamed about with the common people and studied all phases of American life. I went to ward meetings and caucuses, attended political conventions, went to camp meetings, attended classical lectures at Chautauqua, visited schools and colleges, interviewed Mark Twain, and in fact went everywhere that I possibly could and talked with everybody whom I thought had something interesting to tell me. I
have written columns about what I saw, which the Indian papers printed. I am a newspaper man, so I wrote what I had to tell to the newspapers. They were my first impressions of the country, hurriedly written of course, but I mean to publish them in book form some day.”

Here Mr. Kipling excused himself for a moment to get some letters ready for the Indian mail, and handed me his “manifold book,” which contained copies of his Pioneer letters about America, to while away the time. From the cursory examination I was able to make of it in the short time at my disposal I should advise Mr. Kipling to defer publishing this correspondence until he has revisited America and left it with the intention of never going back there. Later on he very kindly allowed me to make some extracts from the scrap-book, which I give verbatim. . . .