Rudyard Kipling

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CHAPTER 2

Eavesdropping on Eternity: ““Wireless””

Of all Kipling’s short stories, ““Wireless”” may well be the most devious. Many years ago the distinguished scholar J. M. S. Tompkins pointed out that Kipling had a tendency to lay false trails in his works.¹ That shrewd observation, a much needed warning to critics, has not, however, prevented commentators from occasionally launching forth on a long trail that Kipling deviously has prepared that leads away from, not to, the promised land of accurate and enlightened exegesis. ““Wireless”” is definitely a case in point. Its particular false trail is that which beckoningly invites a supernatural interpretation of the work, and a good many literary travelers have followed it.

One reason that they have is probably Kipling’s insistence that there was something beyond understanding about how he wrote. Reading what he had to say about his “Daemon” naturally leads to the conclusion that he was thinking of some sort of paranormal phenomenon. He told his friend H. Rider Haggard that he considered himself simply the telephone wire through which the thoughts came.² Their real source, he claimed, was his Daemon, an otherworldly voice that spoke to him from who knows where. Since in ““Wireless”” something mysterious apparently takes place that seems to have to do with the creation of literature, some critics have argued vigorously that at its most important level, the story expresses Kipling’s ideas about the source of artistic inspiration. In this reading, Shaynor’s experience in his “trance,” that is, his calling up of “an induced Keats,” is seen as an illustration of how in Kipling’s view the Daemon works.³

Following the wide and seductive false trail, other commentators see things a bit differently but still with an eye toward paranormal experience. A good many interpret what transpires in ““Wireless”” as “channeling” in which the dead John Keats is summoned forth from the spiritual world as if a séance is taking place with the chemist’s assistant, Mr. Shaynor, as the medium and the narrator as the rapt observer of
the supernatural occurrence. Somerset Maugham insisted that the primary subject of “Wireless” is metempsychosis: John Shaynor was actually John Keats in another life, and in the story he regresses to that past existence. Perhaps the most prevalent explanation of what is happening when Shaynor seems to be in touch with the spirit of John Keats is that some form of thought transference is taking place—that “the subconscious is taken over by some unexplained external influence aided by a similarity in physical conditions and struggles to reproduce the work of another mind which it has never known.”

These various approaches to “Wireless,” which all emphasize that in the story something mysterious or even supernatural happens, appear to reach that conclusion because it is what the narrator believes and what he conveys to readers. He is thoroughly convinced that what he has witnessed has a supernatural dimension: the spirit of Keats has been called up (“induced”) from the dead by a combination of powers and circumstances. Critics by and large take him at his word. They generally accept his observations, perceptions, and judgments as sound, and they seldom question his reliability. In understanding “Wireless” the most fundamental questions to be posed are these: Who is the narrator? Is he reliable?

The answers most often encountered in commentaries on the story are that he is the author himself and thus is, indeed, reliable in the sense that there is no discrepancy between what he is conveying and Kipling’s own point of view. Much in the story certainly appears to support the idea that Kipling and the narrator are one and the same. Kipling’s interests and traits are frequently evident in the characterization of the narrator. For instance, he is fascinated with the early experiments in wireless telegraphy. So was Kipling, who reportedly had lunch in 1899 with the inventor of the wireless, Guglielmo Marconi, and questioned him extensively. The narrator is an admirer of the seventeenth-century physician-astrologer Nicolas Culpeper; so was Kipling, who wrote about him in another short story (“A Doctor of Medicine”), gave a speech about him (“Healing By the Stars”), and mentioned him in his letters. Like Kipling, the narrator of “Wireless” is a discriminating reader of literature and is intimately familiar with the poetry of John Keats (as well as with that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge).

In spite of these similarities to the author, there are pronounced differences. The narrator’s demeanor while in the chemist’s shop seems out of character for Kipling. He takes liberties that would be strikingly audacious and pushy for the author. After entering and speaking with
Shaynor, he immediately steps behind the counter as if he owned the place. He explains that he has become friends with Cashell, the chemist-proprietor of the shop, but that fact does not prevent his conduct from seeming oddly presumptuous as he moves about the pharmacy making himself totally at home without the slightest fear that he may be overstepping the bounds of decorum. While Mr. Shaynor is away with Fanny Brand, he “explored many of the glass-knobbed drawers that lined the walls, tasted some disconcerting drugs, and by the aid of a few cardamoms, ground ginger, chloric-ether, and dilute alcohol, manufactured a new and wildish drink.”

He rambles through the dispensary and appropriates anything he wishes for his own use. Yet this seemingly unusual behavior has apparently not stirred much interest or aroused much curiosity among critics of the story who generally consider the narrator to be Kipling rather than a character that he has created. The narrator’s actions and attitude did, however, upset a certain druggist, the “friendly local pharmacist” of John H. McGivering, who asked him about the concoction that the narrator of “Wireless” makes up and gives to Shaynor. The druggist “conceded that such a mixture might work, but was shocked by the idea of an unqualified person turned loose in the dispensary.” It is surprising that the reaction of McGivering’s pharmacist has not been more widely expressed, for if, indeed, the narrator is Kipling, are his actions in the dispensary not highly inappropriate?

It would probably not be inappropriate for a fellow apothecary to take some liberties in a chemist’s shop with which he was familiar and one where he was a friend of the proprietor. It does not seem likely, however, that the narrator is an apothecary because he is not familiar with the function of the organization that old Mr. Cashell tells him about, Apothecaries’ Hall. He definitely would be were he an apothecary. What seems more likely is that the narrator is a doctor, a person knowledgeable about drugs who could safely be “turned loose in the dispensary.”

On numerous occasions, he does speak and act very much like a doctor. If he had realized that, McGivering’s pharmacist might still have been somewhat displeased but not shocked, for a doctor highly familiar with chemicals and curative drugs would not in this situation be “an unqualified person.” In fact, one might even have expected such a person at that time and in that setting to act as he does if he knew the chemist well and had “used the shop for some time” in his practice. He is obviously knowledgeable about all sorts of herbs and com-
pounds, such as “ammoniated quinine,” “chloric-ether,” and “cones of benzoin” used at this period in the practice of medicine.

A further indication that the narrator is probably a physician who knows a good deal about various medicines and is to be trusted among them is John Shaynor’s reaction to him. Shaynor is fussy about what he considers the proper way to speak to customers, even regular customers. He takes on a “professional tone” when dealing with them. No doubt he would be highly disconcerted if one of these customers suddenly decided to step behind the counter with him or to roam about among the various drugs, opening drawers and making up potions for himself. Yet he apparently finds nothing at all odd about the liberties that the narrator takes in the shop, and his conversation with him is relaxed and natural as indeed it would be with a physician who is a good friend of the shop’s owner.

Furthermore, the rapport that the narrator has established with old Mr. Cashell clearly goes beyond that of chemist and customer. When Cashell recommends that he complain to Apothecaries’ Hall about a chemist who has made a mistake in filling a prescription (perhaps one the narrator has prescribed for a patient), he is grateful for the advice and places full confidence in the chemist. Old Mr. Cashell’s conversation with the narrator about the errant druggist closely resembles that between a trusted pharmacist and a doctor whom he knows well and cooperates with as a partner in the healing arts. He refers to the chemist who made the mistake as “a disgrace to our profession.” He advises the narrator: “You couldn’t do a better service to the profession than report him to Apothecaries’ Hall.” That he does not mean by “the profession” simply his own is clear from his follow-up comment in which he insists upon the connection between the chemist and the physician. They are one in the science of healing, and the effectiveness and standing of the doctor is in the hands of the pharmacist. The “compounder,” Cashell explains with passion, is himself “a medicine-man. On him depends the physician’s reputation. He holds it literally in the hollow of his hand.” By “our profession,” then, Cashell seems more than likely to be referring to what he and the narrator share—they are both “medicine-men.”

The narrator’s profession as physician is also reflected in his interest in John Shaynor’s disease. The chemist’s assistant does not tell the narrator that his cough has become more severe, but he does not have to. The physician-narrator notices that right away: “I’m sorry your cough’s worse.” Reflecting a doctor’s interest in what the tubercular Shaynor
is medicating himself with, he later asks: “What do you take for your—cough?” Such a question would be natural for a doctor to ask. The pause in the question, represented by a dash, is telling, for it indicates that he is fully aware, as any physician would be, that Shaynor is suffering from tuberculosis, and more than likely he starts to use that term, but realizing that the patient refuses to accept (or face) that diagnosis, he names the symptom rather than the disease. When Shaynor insists upon going out into the cold to walk with Fanny Brand, the narrator cautions him, as a doctor would: “You’d better wrap yourself up.”

After Shaynor returns to the shop, the narrator, like a physician visiting a chronically sick patient, “moved about the glittering shop as one moves in a sick-room.” Then, echoing a doctor’s order to his patient, he directs Shaynor to drink some of the compound that he has made up: “Here; I said, when the drink was properly warmed, ‘take some of this, Mr. Shaynor.’” When the narrator speaks of what he has seen on Shaynor’s handkerchief, he does not use the common term “blood” but the medical phrase “arterial blood,” and he seems to be speaking diagnostically when he remarks upon its “bright red colour” as an unmistakable symptom.

Once it is established that Kipling is narrating through a fictional character, a persona, the story unfolds in an entirely different manner from the way it does when the narrator is assumed to be Kipling himself. It is the failure to distinguish between Kipling and the narrator of “‘Wireless’” that has led to the widespread misunderstanding that it expresses a deeply held conviction of the author’s about some supernatural or supernormal phenomena. That conviction is the narrator’s, not Kipling’s. From a careful examination of what the doctor-narrator says about himself and his actions, aspects of his personality, judgment, and perception come into focus, and it becomes clear that his interpretation of events is highly subjective; he sees what he wishes to see, and he concludes what is most in keeping with his predilections.

Given the narrator’s overall characterization as it gradually develops, it seems likely that he has come to witness the wireless experiment not strictly because he is interested in its promise with regard to the progress of science and technology. He may well have another reason, his hope that Marconi’s invention of wireless telegraphy might have additional implications, that it could foreshadow the discovery that, as the scientist and spiritualist Oliver Lodge posited, the same “Hertzian” waves that send messages through the “ether” from the living to the living could also send them from the dead to the living. This is perhaps
what he means when he states: “For reasons of my own, I was deeply interested in Marconi experiments at their outset in England.” When the chemist’s assistant goes into what seems a kind of trance and then begins to recite and write down lines from Keats’s poem “The Eve of St. Agnes,” the narrator’s reactions reveal his eagerness to experience the thrill of paranormal phenomena. At first, he “stepped nearer to listen” to Shaynor. Then, he says, “I moved forward astonished.” This is followed by a telling action: he shuts the door to the inner office where old Mr. Cashell’s nephew is engaged in trying to reach the city of Poole on his wireless mechanism. He becomes more interested in this form of “induction” than the electrical sort. After he looks over Shaynor’s shoulder to see what he is writing, the hair on his head seems to “crackle,” as does the wireless trying to reach Poole. It is an experience of such emotional depth for him because he evidently believes (or at least suspects) that he is witnessing a wireless communication with the dead.

The impact of this realization overwhelms him. For a moment or two, he says, “the shop spun before me in a rainbow-tinted whirl,” and he has to try to bring himself back to reality. That he is not merely an objective observer of Shaynor’s peculiar behavior is clearly indicated by his admission that he was “whispering encouragement” to, as he puts it, “my other self” as well as to Shaynor as he proceeds to reproduce lines from “The Eve of St. Agnes.” He finds himself “nodding approval” and murmuring “That’s it…. That’s how it’s blocked out. Go on! Ink it in, man. Ink it in!” He is filled with wonder and unspeakable awe. His throat becomes parched, but, he explains, “I dared not gulp to moisten it lest I should break the spell.” He is not only watching Shaynor but also cheering him on, perhaps seeking fulfillment of his own hopes and dreams that it is possible to communicate with the world of spirits. He suggests the intensity that the moment has for him: “A drop of sweat trickled from my forehead down my nose and splashed on the back of my hand.”

The narrator resembles a man whom Kipling knew well, Arthur Conan Doyle, who was trained as a physician and practiced for a time, a man who believed so strongly in the power of logic and the wonders of reasoning that he created the prototype of all great detectives, Sherlock Holmes, but who at the same time became totally convinced that it is possible to communicate with the dead. The doctor of “Wireless” is also a logical, reasonable person, but like Conan Doyle he is eager to believe in the spirit world. Indeed, what he thinks he is wit-
nessing in the apothecary shop confirms that belief. If Conan Doyle had been there and seen the same thing, he might have reached the same conclusion, and he might well have been as emotionally involved as is the narrator.28

The narrator arrives at the conclusion that he has observed “an induced Keats” through what appears to be a careful process of reasoning.29 He considers first the question of whether Shaynor has read the writings of Keats, and he logically posits that if he has, then no supernatural activity has taken place but the extraordinary performance of the chemist’s assistant has been brought on by his drinking chloric ether. If, however, Shaynor has not read Keats, he reasons, then something else is happening, something truly phenomenal. He seems to argue with himself at this point, his logic questioning his eagerness to accept right away a supernatural explanation of what he is seeing. His power of reason is short-circuited, however, by emotion, which causes him to believe what he wishes to believe, namely, that he already has enough evidence of the supernatural without further questions or considerations. Rationalizing, he finds the result of his thinking process “logical and inevitable. As inevitable as induction.”30

In a moment of self-lucidity, he confesses—but without regret or embarrassment—that the proof for what he wants to believe is inadequate: “I was even in advance of my facts, walking hurriedly before them, assured that they would fit my theory.” He has “devised a theory” that is “sane and plausible to my mind.”31 Yet his mind is not the controlling consciousness of the story. He is merely the persona. Behind that assumed personality is at all times another person, the author himself, who is always in charge, revealing the truth subtly where the persona is misled and creating through double entendre a web of highly effective irony that runs through the work and poignantly shows the difference between the narrator’s perception of the truth and the truth itself.

The crucial moment in revealing that difference occurs when the narrator questions Shaynor, asking him that all-important question as to whether he has read Keats. “I meant to ask you,” he says after Shaynor seems to have recovered his composure, “If you’ve ever read anything written by a man called Keats.” With something of a flush on his face, Shaynor answers, “Oh! I haven’t much time to read poetry, and I can’t say that I remember the name exactly. Is he a popular writer?”32 By the manner in which the narrator responds to Shaynor’s answer, it is clear that he is not prepared to perceive the truth. Precisely as was the case when he prematurely formulated his “epoch making theory” about an
“induced Keats” before he had adequate evidence to justify such a view, he has prematurely decided that Shaynor has never read or even heard of Keats. Therefore, he readily accepts Shaynor’s answer because he wants and needs to. A less emotionally involved and more objective person would realize from the way that the chemist’s assistant words his answer that he is lying. The question put to him contains no information about Keats; it does not inform him that Keats wrote poetry. Yet his answer clearly indicates that he knows Keats wrote poetry: “Oh! I haven’t much time to read poetry.” He goes on to claim that he has no knowledge at all of who Keats may be, does not remember ever hearing his name. Yet he knows he was a poet. Not only the narrator’s theory about Shaynor’s strange behavior but also all critical readings of the story are based on the assumption that Shaynor is telling the truth. Kipling’s false trail has enticed a multitude to follow it.

It is Shaynor’s lie that invalidates the perception of the narrator in regard to what takes place during the “trance” episode and necessitates an interpretation of that event other than the one the narrator provides. Because we recognize what the narrator does not—that the chemist’s assistant is not telling the truth about having read Keats—a gap of credibility suddenly opens between readers and the persona who is narrating. He is no longer a reliable interpreter of the events. Nor is he a perceptive judge of character, John Shaynor’s, for example. The narrator sees Shaynor simply as a tubercular chemist’s assistant thoroughly devoted to his work, a person admirably schooled in the apothecary arts who reads only those books dealing with that subject. The narrator has more or less taken him under his wing, furnished him with appropriate reading material, and admired his efficiency in the pharmacy.

But what is John Shaynor really like? What is happening to him when he seems to be struggling to find the right words from Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes”? Why does he lie about never having heard of Keats? His is a humble background, his mother a schoolteacher and his father, who died when John was a child, a “small job-master at Kirby Moors.” John has managed to become a chemist’s assistant, which was not easy for him. He has found the examinations that he has had to take to be of “exceeding and increasing difficulty.” He is proud of his progress so far, and he is ambitious to have a shop of his own in London some day. Above all, he considers himself a professional, a person who is, as it were, all business. He makes it known that he reads long, complicated texts that deal with his occupation, books like Christie’s *New Commercial Plants*, and the narrator is duly impressed with what appears to be
a total devotion to his profession: “For relaxation he seemed to go no farther afield than the romance of drugs—their discovery, preparation, packing, and export.”

The fact is, however, that John Shaynor is something of an actor, a person capable of pretending, of putting on a convincing mask, a side of him that the narrator seems not to perceive. He admits to the narrator: “There’s a way you get into ... serving them [customers] carefully, and I hope, politely, without stopping your own thinking.” He confesses that he can make up most prescriptions in his sleep; in other words, he can put on a front of being strictly a professional while thinking his own thoughts. This duality is evident when an old lady comes into the pharmacy for a medication, and Shaynor who has been speaking one way to the narrator suddenly returns to his “professional tone.” In a stiff, formal voice, strikingly in contrast to that characterizing his conversation with the narrator, he says to his customer: “We’ve just run out of it in bottles, madam ... but if you will wait two minutes, I’ll make it up for you, madam.”

What Shaynor is doing with his “professional tone” is covering up something, to be more precise, his humble background. He wants to amount to something, to be somebody. To do that, he has to put on a front to hide where he comes from and to appear solidly professional. It is this motivation that is behind the lie on which the story turns. He is lying about his having read Keats because he is ashamed to admit to the narrator that he has been distracted from his professional duties by reading poetry, romantic poetry. He wishes everyone to believe exactly what the narrator believes—to wit, that he does not waste his time on matters not associated with his dispensary work, that “he seemed to go no farther afield than the romance of drugs.”

Actually, another kind of romance has come to preoccupy him, and he is frustrated by the effect it is having on him and possibly his future career. He is clearly embarrassed and befuddled when the young woman to whom he is strongly attracted, Fanny Brand, enters the shop. The narrator notes that immediately “the face and bearing of Mr. Shaynor changed.” With Fanny’s bold insistence that he leave his post in the dispensary and take a walk with her, a major conflict raging within him is presented in miniature. To go with her represents to him an almost unthinkable abandonment of his duties, but if he refuses to do what she wishes, he fears that she will cease to be interested in him. His weak refusal, “but I can’t,” whispered “uneasily,” is accompanied by a “dull red” flush on his face while “his eyes shone like a drugged moth’s.”
His situation is both humorous and pathetic. The alarm and weakness that he reveals in response to a woman’s commanding him to do something he knows he should not do certainly make him a candidate for traditional humor. The simile comparing him to a drugged moth is highly appropriate, for it foreshadows his drinking the drug chloric ether and exhibiting his obsessive attraction to Fanny Brand. At that point, he is, like the moth in the trope, drugged, and he is also mothlike in being attracted to his “flame,” Fanny Brand.

Shaynor is thus facing the same dilemma that Keats faced as articulated in his letters to Fanny Brawne. Like Keats before him, Shaynor seems to realize that the sexual attraction he is experiencing is pulling him in a direction that is detrimental to his concept of himself and to his professional goals, but that urge has a strong hold on him. That Kipling read the letters that Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne, which were published in 1878 (after her death in 1865) and caused a considerable stir, is clear from the passage in “Wireless” in which Shaynor writes a letter to Fanny Brand that is similar in style and content, in sentiment and spirit, to some of those Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne.

To Keats, Fanny Brawne became an object of worship; she became his religion, as he himself admitted in a letter to her of 13 October 1819:

> I have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion—I have shudder’d at it—I shudder no more—I could be martyr’d for my Religion—Love is my religion—I could die for that—I could die for you. My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet—You have ravish’d me away by a Power I cannot resist.

The “Power” that so ravished Keats was Eros; he considered it as strong as is faith in God to a deeply religious person. Fanny Brand has become the object of John Shaynor’s adoration, his religion, in the same manner as Fanny Brawne became Keats’s. The shrine at which Shaynor worships is a toilet-water advertisement in the shop featuring a voluptuous young woman. To Shaynor she is an icon representing Fanny Brand. Without recognizing its full significance, the narrator mentions it several times. It occupies center stage in the story. Shaynor repeatedly turns his eyes upon it with lascivious adoration. The narrator says that “the flamboyant thing was to him [Shaynor] a shrine.” Shaynor explains that he is “not a Roman Catholic” but that he nevertheless likes to burn incense—like “Blaudett’s Cathedral Pastilles.” The narrator observes that Shaynor’s frequent use of the pastilles near the advertisement is a kind of sacrament involving the
female image in the advertisement, which has “a certain stained-glass
effect.”

By the time Kipling had composed “Wireless,” Keats’s reputation
was solidly established in literary circles as a poet who was of immor-
tal stature but who went rather overboard in his desire for this wom-
an named Fanny. The publication of his letters to Fanny Brawne just
twenty-three years earlier determined in large measure that he would
be thought of at that period both as a great poet of sensuousness and
also as a man of pronounced sensuality, which in the mind of many
contributed to his suffering and destruction.

If in “Wireless” the narrator’s interpretation of events constitutes a
false trail, the right road is surely Kipling’s subtle insistence upon the
power of Eros. The reason for so many references to sickness and death
in the story is to point up that power. Shaynor’s coughing begins in the
first sentence and recurs as a constant reminder (along with the two
spots of blood on his handkerchief) that his illness is incurable. Cold-
ness inside and outside the chemist’s shop is that of impending death.
Influenza is rampant in the town as Shaynor points out, hacking and
coughing away. Old Mr. Cashell, the proprietor of the chemist’s shop,
lies upstairs in bed, too ill to come down and be with his guest, the
narrator. The elderly woman who comes in requires medicine for her
illness. Gruesomely, dead birds and game hang on hooks in the Ital-
ian shop next door, and Shaynor remarks that their appearance makes
“you feel fair perishing.” At one point, Shaynor looks at the narrator
“with eyes as wide and lusterless as those of a dead hare.”

This is a

place of fatality, that is, a fatal attraction. So strong can sexual desire
become that it can persist even when illness is present or when death is
just around the corner, as it was with Keats and is with John Shaynor.

The entire group of images and references to sickness and death in
“Wireless” not only stresses the persistence of the sexual urge but
also serves collectively as a trope for the end result of obsessive lust.
The most effective metaphor within that pattern is tuberculosis. Obvi-
ously in the final stages of consumption (as it was commonly called),
Shaynor, like Keats before him, is loath to admit that he has the dis-
ease. He echoes Keats’s attempts to convince himself that he simply
has a sore throat and a bad cough. The reason for this failure to face
the truth goes beyond the perfectly understandable tendency to avoid
thinking about death and to pretend that one’s condition is not fa-
tal. During Keats’s lifetime and lasting even into the period in which
Kipling wrote “Wireless,” a stigma was associated with tuberculosis.
Many believed that the disease was brought on by excessive sensuality in one’s nature. In her study *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag observes that tuberculosis was long considered a “disease of passion.” The “fever in TB,” she writes, “was a sign of an inward burning: the tubercular is someone ‘consumed’ by ardor, that ardor leading to the dissolution of the body.” It was the metaphor for a “‘diseased’ love, of a passion that ‘consumes.’”

Although some experts on tuberculosis did not believe that excessive sexual drive was the sole cause of the disease, almost all concurred that once it was contracted, it increased the libido to a considerable extent. In the year that Kipling composed “‘Wireless,’” comments appeared in the unsigned “Review of Current Literature” section of the *Journal of Tuberculosis* that clearly emphasized this point: “It is a well-known fact that a tuberculous man has as a rule a marked degree of sexual desire.... Because of the activity of his sexual propensities the phthisical subject often contracts gonorrhoea or syphilis.”

Whether hypersexuality brought on the malady or was the result of it, heightened lust was closely associated with tuberculosis in the public eye. Although his strong sexual desire is the last thing in the world Shaynor wishes to make known, he unconsciously conveys a sense of it on the first page of the story as he “giggles” while telling of how women in hotel rooms taking their baths received a “shock” thanks to a “pole” on the roof. “He told me,” the narrator explains, “that the last time they experimented they put the pole on the roof of one of the big hotels here, and the batteries electrified all the water-supply, and—he giggled—‘the ladies got shocks when they took their baths.’” Shaynor evidently enjoys the image of nude women being shocked by a current or waves that have passed through a “pole.” He considers it a slightly naughty little story—as his nervous giggle suggests—but as in other places, Kipling has electrified it with irony, for in reality it is a highly charged sexual joke complete with phallic symbol and the implied effect of the sex act on women. Shaynor’s fascination with the women shocked in their baths is thus more lurid than he allows himself to admit. His telling of this event to the narrator may not appear to reveal much about what is going on within him, but combined with later disclosures about his strong physical desire for Fanny Brand, it takes on considerable significance.

The force of what Shaynor is feeling is suggested by the multiple references to the sea, although there is no evidence that the narrator is aware of the sea’s role in the events as a traditional metaphor for Eros.
He simply observes that it is always there in the background, its sound underlying the noise and activity of the world but detected in moments of silence between acts, as it were. Its function in the story is similar to a Greek chorus commenting on what is going on within the protagonist of the drama. After Shaynor leaves the shop to be with Fanny Brand and just after the narrator makes up the drink of chloric ether that he will give to the chemist’s assistant, “the noise of the sea on the beach began to make itself known as the traffic on the street ceased.” Its sound is a reminder of what has caused Shaynor to leave his post and a portent of what is to come—Eros is making itself heard in his life. A few pages later, just after Shaynor has finished a letter to Fanny Brand and immediately before he is to take the second drink of the potion that the narrator has prepared from chloric ether, there is a lull in the action when the narrator is aware again of silence, “the silence of a great city asleep.” At this point the sea again makes itself heard in the form of “the even voice of the breakers along the sea-front.” It is the seductive and compelling voice of Eros breaking the silence of one’s inner peace, its sound hypnotic and producing a state of mind as different from accustomed thought as that brought on by a draught of chloric ether.

Each reference to the sea comes in an interval moment between significant incidents. Such a moment occurs after young Cashell has been expounding on “the Power—our unknown Power” (he is referring to the wireless telegraphy) and before Shaynor’s chloric-ether-induced state. “We waited two, three, five minutes,” indicates the narrator. “In that silence,” he continues, could be heard “the boom of the tide.” It is this force representing the power of Eros that Kipling is principally concerned with in the story. Marconi’s wireless is merely a reminder of it. As its waves engulf Shaynor, its sound—now a “boom”—becomes more pronounced.

Running parallel with the growing intensity of Shaynor’s desire for Fanny Brand as reflected in his extraordinary behavior is the growing intensity of the sea, its sound becoming tumultuous as tumult becomes the condition of Shaynor’s mind. The climactic moment occurs toward the end of Shaynor’s “trance” when he writes to his “own dear darling” of his desire to run away with her and to “get that little cottage by the sea, which we are always thinking about.” They could “sit and watch the sea beneath our window,” he continues, “a fairy sea—a fairy sea.” Directly after he writes this, he raises his head and listens. More clearly than ever, more loudly than ever, more insistently than ever, he hears at this moment the voice of Eros, now a roar in his ears as it “leaped
up a note to the sudden fuller surge that signals the change from ebb to flood. It beat in like the change of step throughout an army—this renewed pulse of the sea.\textsuperscript{58}

The power of Eros is emphasized numerous times in “‘Wireless’” through the device of double entendre, which seasons this sexually charged story like a dash of hot sauce on raw oysters, an example of which is Shaynor’s opening remarks: “It’s a funny thing, this Marconi business, isn’t it?... Nothing seems to make any difference, by what they tell me—storms, hills, or anything; but if that’s true we shall know before morning.”\textsuperscript{59} Kipling was interested in Marconi’s wireless for a number of reasons—what it meant for human communication, for defense of his nation, for future technological developments—but in this particular story, it is his metaphor for Eros, which travels through all sorts of barriers (“Nothing seems to make any difference”) in its determination to send its compelling message to the awaiting receiver. It is “our unknown Power—kicking and fighting to be let loose,” words old Mr. Cashell’s nephew uses to describe the sparks leaping from his “great heavy Morse instrument” but which apply equally well to the electric like current of Eros, which causes sparks of sexual desire.\textsuperscript{60} It is without limits or bounds; it is, then, “wireless.” Kipling always chose his titles carefully. When the narrator answers Shaynor’s comment about “this Marconi business” with “Of course it’s true,” he is unknowingly foreshadowing the outcome of the story: before the morning (that is, before this story is over), we shall indeed know the truth—Eros is a powerful urge.

To understand what is happening during the “induced Keats” scene in “‘Wireless,’” it is first necessary to dismiss the idea that Shaynor is in touch with the spirit of the dead poet. Since he lies about having read Keats, it is reasonable to assume that in a state of fevered sexual infatuation with Fanny Brand, he is merely trying to reproduce what he has read (and to some extent memorized). After all, Keats, comments the narrator, is “the lover’s poet.”\textsuperscript{61} Shaynor, the lover, has been reading the lover’s poet, and now after drinking chloric ether, he is attempting to quote and write down from memory what he has read. That he is not able to do so with complete accuracy is understandable; that he does as well as he does might not seem realistic except that, as we learn earlier in the story with a detail that otherwise might seem puzzlingly extraneous and irrelevant, John Shaynor has an excellent memory.\textsuperscript{62}

Under normal circumstances, he would never let himself go as he does during this episode. He is completely oblivious to those around
him as he fixes his gaze on the image of a shapely young woman in a
toilet-water advertisement, who is “bathed” (the word recalls Shaynor’s
interest in the bathing women who were shocked) in “the light from the
red jar.”63 Seeing in this attractive woman the object of his sexual ob-
session, Fanny Brand, he “turned towards the toilet-water lady of the
advertisement and devoured her with his over-luminous eyes.”64 His
aching for Fanny Brand, manifested in the “agony” on his face, is pro-
nounced, and at this moment, he remembers a line, which he quotes
accurately except for one word, from “The Eve of St. Agnes”: “And
threw warm gules on Madeleine’s young [“fair”] breast.”65 Obviously,
he has been focusing on the breasts of the seductive young woman
in the advertisement when the line from the poem enters his head.
Throughout much of the episode, Shaynor’s eyes fix upon the figure of
the woman in the advertisement luridly colored by light from a red jar.

The release of Shaynor’s considerable scruples as he ogles the
gold-framed picture, quotes, speaks, and writes is brought on by the
pleasant-tasting drink that the narrator gives him. It has the double
effect of bringing out what he is feeling and doing so without the slight-
est concern that another person may be present. Besides that, its effect
wears off as suddenly as it comes on, and afterwards he has no memory
of what he has done or said. He feels that he has been asleep, not awake
and exposing all that he wants to keep hidden. Kipling’s research into
what could do all these things was thorough and sound, for he hit upon
the very substance available at that time which would have the desired
effects—a pleasant-tasting anesthetic given in a dose too weak to cause
complete unconsciousness but strong enough to bring on the state of
mind Shaynor exhibits: release of inhibitions, unawareness of the pres-
ence of others, and no aftereffects (including guilt-provoking memory
of what transpired). A drink consisting of chloric ether is what causes
Shaynor to act as he does.

A mixture of the anesthetic chloroform and alcohol (or “rectified
spirits,” as is sometimes indicated), chloric ether in light doses acts
very much like ether itself when given in amounts not sufficient to
bring on unconsciousness. In a mid-nineteenth-century text, John C.
Warren observed that “the general properties of ether have been known
for more than a century, and the effect of its inhalation in producing
exhilaration and insensibility has been understood for many years, not
only by the scientific, but by young men in colleges, and schools, and in
the shop of the apothecary, who have frequently employed it for these
purposes.”66 The author gives numerous examples of people who have
been given ether but do not become unconscious. They simply act in uncharacteristic ways. In one account, Warren tells of a man who suddenly “began to speak rapidly, rose from the bed, and with many gestures uttered a harangue, partly on politics, partly on the medical profession, to which he was highly complimentary.”

While chloric ether can cause pretty much the same sort of behavior, it has certain advantages over ether. For example, it is more pleasant to consume—especially when mixed with the other ingredients that the narrator uses—and it is not likely to cause sickness afterwards. Furthermore, it is considerably less dangerous than pure chloroform although that anesthetic was used recreationally almost from its discovery in 1831. The discoverer of chloroform in America, Samuel Guthrie, wrote that “a great number of persons have drunk the solution ... in my laboratory, not only very freely, but frequently to the point of intoxication, and so far as I have observed, it has appeared to be singularly grateful, both to the palate and stomach, producing a lively flow of animal spirits, and consequent loquacity.”

The more susceptible one is to anesthetics and narcotics, the more likely that person is to respond to a weak solution of chloric ether by exhibiting uninhibited and uncharacteristic behavior. As if to make it clear that Shaynor may be one of those persons highly sensitive to an anesthetic substance such as chloric ether and likely to react strangely and erratically even in response to a weak dosage, Kipling has him remark when offered the drink: “‘Twn’t make me drunk, will it? I’m almost a teetotaler.”

John Shaynor’s anesthetic blackout—and his behavior during that episode—is thus caused by chloric ether acting upon the strong desire he has for Fanny Brand. When the narrator comments that “Fanny Brand ... is the key to the enigma,” he furnishes without being aware of it the key to understanding the events he recounts. In a sense, she is the catalyst of the story. She recalls Fanny Brawne, whose sexual charms were to Keats irresistible. Shaynor finds her so appealing that he has become obsessed with her. Even the narrator of “‘Wireless’” appears to fall under her spell. In a poignant twist of irony, Kipling reveals by ingenious indirection that the narrator’s failure of perception is not limited to his inability to see that Shaynor is something of an actor and that he is lying when asked about his reading but also extends to his own self-knowledge. He cannot perceive what is going on within himself. Fanny Brand has surreptitiously made a foray upon his heart and aroused his libido. In other words, he is the receiver of the Hertzian waves of sexual appeal she sends out just as is John Shaynor.
The narrator is attracted to her from the first moment she enters the shop. Yet his perception fails him here as it does in some other areas. He simply does not yet realize the extent of his attraction to this young woman nor the extent that he is giving himself away with his description of how he reacts to her. He is impressed with how “confidently” she leans across the counter to talk to Shaynor. Then when she speaks to him, insisting that he stand in for Shaynor at the shop while Shaynor accompanies her on a walk, he has no strength to resist her request: “You take the shop for half an hour—to oblige me, won’t you?” Her suggestion that the favor he will be doing will be for her rather than for Shaynor captivates him, and as if to explain why he relents so quickly and easily, he describes her appeal to him: “She had a singularly rich and promising voice that well matched her outline.” To him her voice is Circe-like, and since her “outline,” that is, her shape, her physical feminine attributes, matches the voice, it, too, is seductive.

He finds it difficult to get her out of his mind, for when young Cashell is ready to continue explaining how the wireless works, ironically another wireless telegraphy (that operating on erotic wavelengths) is sending him messages, for he reveals: “I was thinking still of the girl with the rich voice and the significantly cut mouth, at whose command I had taken charge of the shop.” Much like John Shaynor, the narrator connects the comely young woman in the toilet-water advertisement with Fanny Brand and, again like Shaynor, he is sexually aroused by gazing at the picture. He comments on her “seductive shape,” and he states that her “charms were unholily heightened by the glare from the red bottle in the window.” His choice of words is revealing: charms here refers not to her personality (about which he knows nothing) but to her figure. The phrase unholy heightened can only mean that these lust-creating features of her body are wickedly made more appealing by the red light cast on them. Later he refers to “the female in the dove-coloured corset,” and he imagines that “the young woman bathed in the light from the red jar simpered pinkly over her pearls.” The word bathed recalls Shaynor’s naughty story of the women shocked when taking a bath. The implication in context of pinkly is not so much of color as of the shapely young woman’s robust physical condition. Clearly the picture that has evoked sexual desire in Shaynor is having something of the same effect on the narrator. Subtly, Kipling creates a chain of continuity linking John Shaynor and the narrator to Keats for the purpose of stressing the power of Eros.
By the end of “Wireless,” it is clear that the narrator has been on an emotional roller coaster, a ride that has left him spent and ready for his bed. Various urges—such as those aroused by his attraction to Fanny Brand and the young woman in the advertisement—bombard him, but what he is mainly worn out from is the sustained excitement over what he takes to be his discovery that there is another world with which we can communicate. The implications of that for him are simply overwhelming. The final scene of the story finds him experiencing one more emotional high before a disappointment that leaves him unfit for further explorations into the paranormal, at least for the moment. This episode brings the three main characters back together. Shaynor has recovered from his anesthetic-induced haze, and the narrator has completed his questioning of him about his knowledge of John Keats. Cashell invites the two of them to come into the other room to witness the operation of his wireless mechanism, which is picking up messages. At this point, a brief exchange takes place between the narrator and Cashell that is, in effect, an authorial comment, executed through the most poignant irony, on the narrator’s failure of perception as exhibited throughout the story. When the narrator says, “I hope I haven’t missed anything,” irony electrifies the remark, for he has missed just about everything. Cashell’s answer is the author’s: “I’m afraid I can’t say that.”

Once more, however, the narrator’s spirits are lifted, his mind filled with enthusiastic hope, as Cashell explains that he has listened in on two naval vessels sending messages by wireless telegraphy off the Isle of Wight. The narrator’s response is “How wonderful!... We’re eavesdropping across half South England?” His intense excitement derives not so much from his awareness that this new technology is working but principally from his eagerness to have proof that such technology will have uses that go beyond the apparent. In the future perhaps it will help humankind to eavesdrop on eternity as he believes he has been doing in witnessing the behavior of Shaynor in his trance. He had reasons of his own, we recall at this point, for being “deeply interested in Marconi experiments.” Suddenly, however, his enthusiasm is dampened. Something is wrong with the wireless. It can receive but not transmit. It is faulty. Discouragement overtakes the narrator. Somehow in his mind, what happened in that other room with John Shaynor is tied in with what happens in this room with the wireless. Then come the words from those ships, “Disheartening—most disheartening,” Cashell’s pejorative comment about “a spiritualistic séance,” and Shaynor’s views that the medium in such a séance is always a fraud. It seems doubtful that
these three opinions suddenly make the narrator see the light despite that fact that they, indeed, have the ring of truth, especially the last one, for the “medium” in the “séance” that the narrator has witnessed—John Shaynor—is, indeed, something of a fraud. The effect that they do have is to increase the narrator’s emotional exhaustion. Even when Cashell announces that the wireless now seems to be working properly, the narrator finds that he is too tired to muster his hope and enthusiasm once more.

The narrator’s interpretation of events in “‘Wireless,’” then, is not reliable. His perception of the key episode is far removed from what actually takes place. Like the narrator of “‘The Finest Story in the World,’” he believes what he needs to believe about what he has seen. Underlying his highly personal and subjective perception of what happened, however, is another version that is not so otherworldly, intriguing, and mysterious. Kipling’s real subject in “‘Wireless’” has little to do with the wonders of the invisible world and much to do with the power of Eros as evinced in the experience of Keats with Fanny Brawne and echoed in the experience of Shaynor with Fanny Brand. In other words, “‘Wireless’” is principally about sexual obsession, not about the inexplicable mysteries of artistic inspiration, spiritualistic channeling, reincarnation, or thought transference. No one was more aware than Rudyard Kipling of how enticing calls from the other world can be. In his story “‘They,’” he seems to suggest that he believed in the reality of the spirit world. His cousin A. W. Baldwin remembers that when in a conversation Kipling was asked “if he thought there was ‘anything in spiritualism,’” he answered: “There is; I know.” But he hurriedly added: “Have nothing to do with it.” Though he may appear to have something to do with it in “‘Wireless,’” actually he does not. It is his narrator who has something to do with it and as a result proves himself to be as gullible and misled as many other smart and talented men, as was, for instance, Arthur Conan Doyle, an acquaintance with whom Kipling felt little kinship.

The Poem that Accompanies “‘Wireless’”

When Kipling collected “‘Wireless’” in Traffics and Discoveries two years after its initial publication in Scribner’s Magazine in 1902, it was accompanied by “Kaspar’s Song in ‘Varda,’” which in later versions carries the title “Butterflies.” The poem is so closely related to “‘Wireless’” that it necessitates a discussion in conjunction with that story:
Eyes aloft, over dangerous places,
The children follow where Psyche flies,
And, in the sweat of their upturned faces,
Slash with a net at the empty skies.

So it goes they fall amid brambles,
And sting their toes on the nette-tops,
Till after a thousand scratches and scrambles
They wipe their brows, and the hunting stops.

Then to quiet them comes their father
And stills the riot of pain and grief,
Saying, “Little ones, go and gather
Out of my garden a cabbage leaf.

“You will find on it whorls and clots of
Dull grey eggs that, properly fed,
Turn, by way of the worm, to lots of
Radiant Psyches raised from the dead.”

“Heaven is beautiful, Earth is ugly,”
The three-dimensioned preacher saith,
So we must not look where the snail and the slug lie
For Psyche’s birth…. And that is our death!

Few critics have been interested enough to try to decipher this enigmatic little poem. Those who have tried or who have made passing comments about it appear to look at it much in the same way—that Psyche symbolizes either art or something spiritual. Lloyd H. Chandler gives a brief interpretation of the poem in his A Summary of the Work of Rudyard Kipling. He says that it “deals with the transformation in nature of the repulsive into the beautiful.”\(^{80}\) J. M. S. Tompkins admitted that she was “baffled” by the poem. However, she did venture a tentative interpretation: “It seems to say that the spiritual is apprehended only if we accept the whole process of nature, as we learn to know it, and that to reject that is spiritual death.” But she goes on to say with admirable honesty: “But I am not sure, and the attempt to relate it too closely to Shaynor’s state [in “Wireless”] seems to throw the tale off its centre.”\(^{81}\)

Several years later, C. A. Bodelsen tried his hand at an interpretation in which he concluded that the poem is about art and how it is created: Kipling “shows an example of a finished work of art,” that is, the butterfly, and “demonstrates how it has sprung from ordinary earthly material (cf. the grubs on the cabbage leaf in the poem.)”\(^{82}\)
For “art,” Bonamy Dobrée substituted “spiritual growth” and “beauty.” He argues that the work concerns “the earthly basis for all spiritual growth.” He continues:

For it is from the “whorls and clots of / Dull grey eggs” found on the cabbage-leaf, and turning to worms, that butterflies will come. Beauty is not to be gathered ready-made, however ardently pursued; it must be distilled from the drab; we must not listen to highfalutin nonsense…. It is our death [to do so] because the man who gives the advice is three-dimensioned—of material solidity, and three dimensions are not enough.\(^3\)

A problem inherent in the view that Psyche (or the butterfly) symbolizes something spiritual is that, as Tompkins pointed out, it then becomes difficult to see a connection between the poem and the story that it accompanies. If, on the other hand, the butterfly symbolizes not the spiritual but a work of art, why are the children trying to net butterflies rather than attempting to create them or a semblance of them? My own view is that the butterflies symbolize neither art nor the spiritual. Actually, they represent something entirely different, something that closely links the poem with “Wireless.”

Mr. Shaynor in “Wireless” is very much like the men-children in “Kaspar’s Song” as they run after a creature they wish to possess. In doing so, they stumble and go awry, injuring themselves on brambles. The hunt ends in hurt and desolation. To them comes the wise voice of maturity in the poem, that of Kipling, who has had a bit of experience with this sort of thing: stop chasing butterflies is his implied advice. Realize what they are. They are not what you think. If you knew what they are, you would not consider them such a wonderful catch. They are not, says this fatherly figure, heavenly, spiritual creatures. They are, in fact, made of the same stuff of earth as the rest of us. Furthermore, they are not as rare as you perceive them to be. They are, in the vernacular, a dime a dozen, lots of them showing up all the time. Now you will hear from those who profess to know what they are talking about that butterflies are so beautiful that they could not come from anything ugly, anything earthly; these “preachers” of a sort claim that butterflies are transcendent creatures, worthy of our adoration. Creators of the illusion of ideal woman are “three-dimensional” people, persons who give the illusion of depth. They are not deep but mistaken. To accept their message, says the voice of wisdom in the poem, is to give up our lives, that is, to die to our best selves in pursuit of a false dream.

The butterfly is Kipling’s metaphor for an appealing woman (Psyche in the poem), who is so alluring that men-children filled with desire for
her pursue her endlessly trying to have her. They are motivated by the power of Eros (personified in myth as a child figure). Finally, after they are greatly diminished and injured, they are forced to give up the hunt. To them, Kipling sends a message, to him personally a hard-earned one: the power that has gained control over you has its basis in hyper-sexual excitement, which fills you with false messages, building up the object of your desire beyond all reason.

“Kaspar’s Song” is more than a warning, however; it is a direct answer to Keats’s “Ode to Psyche” (1820). In that poem Keats glorifies Psyche (often represented by a butterfly), who was a mere mortal until Eros fell in love with her and was instrumental in her becoming a goddess. Kipling’s answer to Keats (whom he greatly admired) is that despite his being a poet of rare talent and noble soul, he was, like many great men, greatly misled about a woman, so misled that he became one of the “preachers” mentioned in “Kaspar’s Song,” those who preach the adoration of Psyche. The butterfly Psyche is not really a goddess, not actually worthy of a shrine. She is not of Heaven but of Earth, “where the snail and the slug lie.” In effect, Kipling is saying to Keats, “In your vision, perverted by sexual passion, you see her as the essence of desirability, and you yearn above all else to have her, possess her, but in reality she is not what you have built her up to be.

The foolishness and peril of building shrines to butterflies is not only the subject of “‘Wireless’” but also several of Kipling’s other works. In “The Vampire” (1897), for example, the butterfly—what the male of the poem takes to be an irresistible woman—is in reality a disgusting creature, though the smitten victim cannot see her that way. He does not know that which Kipling reminded us of some years later: “The female of the species is more deadly than the male.” The usual explanation as to why Kipling wrote “The Vampire” is that he did so merely as a favor to his artist cousin, Philip Burne-Jones, who had painted a picture representing a woman about to suck the life’s blood from a hapless admirer obviously obsessed with her. The picture was shown at the New Gallery in London, and Kipling’s poem was published in the catalog of the exhibit (and also in the Daily Mail) insuring considerable attention for Burne-Jones’s painting. Although these were the circumstances under which the poem was composed, the truth is that Kipling would not have written it if he had not felt that he had something to say on the subject.

The Light That Failed (1891), an even earlier work than “The Vampire,” deals with the tragedy that can result from building a shrine in
one’s heart to a butterfly. By the time he had completed a draft of that novel, probably in August of 1890, he was, as Harold Orel puts it, “on the verge of a nervous breakdown.” Contributing to that state of mind was not only his having worked lately at a feverish pitch but also something that happened to him in the spring. He visited in Paris a young woman, Florence Garrard, whom he had known since he was fourteen. Since then he had never been able to get her out of his mind for very long. She was a painter, two years older than he, who had lived for a time in the Holloway household in Southsea after he had spent some desolate years there. His sister Trix was still with Mrs. Holloway when he came on holiday from the United Services College to visit her and met Flo. Though still a boy, he felt her allure so strongly that he could for a considerable time afterwards think of little else but her. He wrote her letters, composed poems about her, and in general acted the part of Keats after he fell for Fanny Brawne. He was, without question, obsessed with her. He finally got her to agree—tentatively—to marry him someday. At least, he thought that he had that promise.

When he began working as a journalist in India, his ardor for her did not diminish. He felt often that he was making a fool of himself, but he continued to expose his heart to her. Lord Birkenhead has observed that “he referred to her as ‘My Lady,’ but at the same time thought that anyone in his condition was stupid beyond words.” Without realizing it, he was experiencing what Keats had so painfully felt. He expressed his frustration at the time in terms that are strikingly Keatsean: “I have written and told her that, save and except her letters, I have nothing,—absolutely nothing, and that is a fact.” He goes on to comment that he can “repeat the letters [hers] off by heart.”

In July of 1884 (he had arrived in India in October of 1882), he received a letter from Flo informing him in unambiguous terms that their “engagement,” as he conceived of their relationship, was off. As usual, he buried his bereavement—that is the only word appropriate for the emotion he felt—in his work and produced an impressive body of writing. Leaving India in March 1889, he traveled from India to London via the Orient and America. Arriving in London in October, he took rooms in the Embankment Chambers, 19 Villiers Street. Some time in late January or early February of the next year, he encountered Flo by chance on a London street. It was for him a moment of magnitude. He was visibly shaken but unspeakably delighted. Charles Carrington writes that the sight of Flo made him realize “in a moment that she still retained her power over him.” The embers flamed up again, redder
and hotter than ever. Determined to resume his pursuit of her, he visited her in early May in Paris, where she shared a studio with another female artist, both of them students at the Académie Julian. His four days there were filled with high excitement and, finally, with profound disappointment, for Flo could not reciprocate his passion, and he could at last see clearly that his desire for her would never be fulfilled.

He poured his hurt into The Light That Failed, which he wrote close on the heels of his devastating Paris visit to see Flo. In the novel, Dick Heldar, obsessed with a girl named Maisie (a thinly veiled version of Flo), is profoundly wounded by her rejection. After going through a hellish period in which he loses his sight—symbolic of how blind he has been in building a shine to this butterfly Maisie—he regains his self-respect and balance but only by determining to die a heroic death in battle, which he does.

The poem that accompanies “Wireless” in Traffics and Discoveries is a reiteration of the theme of the story, the power of obsessive sexual attraction. Kipling was little more than a child when he himself followed where Psyche flew, casting his net “at the empty skies” and falling “amid brambles.” In retrospect, he knew of what he spoke in “Kaspar’s Song.”That is, what happens to those who are hit with that deadly missile shot from Eros, those like Shaynor in “Wireless.”91