Rudyard Kipling

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Published by ELT Press

Dillingham, William B.
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CHAPTER 6

The Monastery of a Dream: “The Eye of Allah”

Because Kipling evidently researched the subject of monasteries in the middle ages for his story “The Eye of Allah” (1926) so that he could get his details right (as usual appear to be an authority) and used various books that have been identified or suggested in commentaries, the story has often been thought of as being “realistic,” that is, as being faithful to facts in terms of what life in a thirteenth-century English monastery was like. Biographers and critics do recognize, however, that Kipling took certain liberties with historical fact with regard to a couple of matters. They point out that the microscope, which is of central importance in the story, could not have appeared, even prematurely, as early as it does in “The Eye of Allah”—the thirteenth century. In real life, it was developed some three hundred years later. Moreover, two historical figures who are in the story, Roger Bacon and Roger of Salerno, actually did not live at the same time: Roger of Salerno (1140–1195) was dead by the time Roger Bacon (1214–1294) was born. These historical inaccuracies, critics generally argue, are deliberate on the author’s part and actually function to make the story more powerful. They are part of the particular kind of realism Kipling has artfully created in which imagination is combined with fact. Angus Wilson refers to “The Eye of Allah” as “Kipling’s finest story of historical conjecture.” Laurence Davies calls the story an illustration of “that subgenre of speculative fiction known as alternative history.” In other words, Kipling’s violations of historical fact are calculated and intentional and do not affect the believability, the deeper realism, of the story.

It is rare (if not unique) for a critic to point out that the monastery Kipling depicts in “The Eye of Allah” is not true to what monastic life in thirteenth-century England, according to various dependable historians, was actually like. The general feeling seems to be that Kipling fol-
followed carefully what he learned from such sources as Abbot Gasquet’s English Monastic Life (1904), a copy of which, as Andrew Lycett indicates, Kipling had in his library. Furthermore, Kipling had become friendly with the author of that book since they were both members of the Athenaeum Club, and visited him while in Rome, where Gasquet had become the Prefect of the Vatican Archives. It is thus possible that Kipling picked up additional facts about monasteries from his conversations with Gasquet.

To be sure, “The Eye of Allah” does reflect a detailed knowledge of the physical makeup of monasteries of the time, a familiarity with the various titles and specific tasks of those who resided there, and a depth of understanding of the cultural context. Nevertheless, the monastery that Abbot Stephen de Sautré is in charge of in Kipling’s story, St. Illod’s, is certainly not the typical Pre-Reformation English Benedictine monastery described in Gasquet’s book. Gasquet does not provide information about widespread laxity in thirteenth-century monasteries, but it is pervasive in Kipling’s version of monastic life, which he explains away in the story as follows: “It was an easy age before Rome [the Papacy] tightened the screw.” In this sentence, Kipling is referring specifically to the status of children of those who had taken (and broken) vows of chastity, but readers and critics tend to accept the statement as an adequate explanation of a general atmosphere of tolerance that marks St. Illod’s.

It was not unheard of for monks in the thirteenth century to have mistresses; so the fact that in “The Eye of Allah” the artist John Otho has a mistress whom he visits periodically in Spain is not necessarily a violation of historic accuracy, but not only does the monk John Otho have a mistress but so does the Abbot himself, and she lives on the very premises of the monastery. Gasquet discloses no such goings on in monasteries and would probably agree with a certain unnamed “ecclesiastical historian” who informed J. M. S. Tompkins that “however lax Rome was in the thirteenth century about wives of parish priests, or even about monks having resort to houses in the town, Anne of Norton could not have lived in the monastery, honourably referred to as ‘the Abbot’s Lady.’” Tompkins revealed this information in an article some years after her pioneering study of Kipling’s conscious craftsmanship as a writer was published, The Art of Rudyard Kipling (1959), but she argues that Kipling can and should be forgiven for such a breach of realism due to the fact that he needed “a beloved and dying woman to put in sharp focus the potentialities that the Abbot aborts when he
smashes the Eye of Allah—and this need can on occasion overpower realism, probability and historical authenticity."

Be that as it may, the role of a monastery abbot as Gasquet defines it is a distant remove from the part that Stephen de Sautré plays in “The Eye of Allah,” although when he asserts his authority near the end of the story and demands that the microscope be handed to him for destruction, the four characters present feel that they must obey him, and in doing so (but not without vehement objection on the part of three of them) they are reflecting the obedience that, according to Gasquet, the superior is due in the religious hierarchy. The abbot, Gasquet emphasizes, was not to be disobeyed unless his subjects were asked to do something evil:

The monastic system established by St. Benedict was based entirely upon the supremacy of the abbot.... The subject is told to obey without question or hesitation the decision of the superior. It is of course needless to say that this obedience did not extend to the commission of evil.... Upon this principle of implicit obedience to authority depended the power and success of the monastic system."

Aside from exercising the power of his office as abbot on this particular occasion, Stephen does not resemble the portrayal of a monastery abbot that Gasquet offers especially when detailing how an abbot dealt with those under him on a daily basis. Gasquet states that the abbot would strive, as he indeed should, to maintain a proper distance between himself and those for whom he was the superior. The abbot, writes Gasquet, was aware that he “must be careful not to lower the dignity of his office by too much condescending” to those under his authority. Stephen is not so careful. In fact, he speaks quite frankly and openly to John as man to man about the latter’s mistress in Spain and other matters, not chastising the artist but actually envying him. He allows others to speak to him as well without the formality and respect that Gasquet claims an abbot is due. In an early conversation dealing with John’s unusual paintings of evil spirits in his illustrations for the Book of Luke, Stephen does not seem surprised much less taken aback when the artist, who like Stephen is well born (“he was a de Sanford on his mother’s side”), addresses him as an equal, and “looked the Abbot full in the face” to ask him a rather personal question about his experience with “devils” while he was a prisoner of the Saracens in Cairo. The exalted position of the abbot in Gasquet’s description, for whom deference was manifested in such acts as bowing and stepping aside when he went by and kissing his hand when he returned from a
trip as well as being extremely careful in the manner with which one addressed him—all of this and more to be found in Gasquet—is quite unlike Stephen’s display of camaraderie in “The Eye of Allah.”

In numerous ways Stephen is entirely too familiar with his subjects, too open with them, too much one of them, for him to represent the figure that Gasquet delineates as the abbot of an English monastery of that time. Gasquet makes a point of emphasizing that the abbot should always remember that he is to consider himself—as those under him should consider him—as nothing less than a stand-in for Christ in the monastery:

The title abbot (abbas) means father, and was used from the earliest times as a title appropriate to designate the superior of a religious house, as expressing the paternal qualities which should characterise his rule. St. Benedict says that “an abbot who is worthy to have charge of a monastery ought always to remember by what title he is called,” and that “in the monastery he is considered to represent the person of Christ, seeing that he is called by His name.”

St. Benedict’s words “ought always to remember” obviously leave no room for exceptions. Yet in “The Eye of Allah,” Stephen takes off his ring, which signifies his authority, and drops it in a cup just before he leads the group of five in after-dinner conversation. He is communicating to his guests the idea that he wishes to be considered one of them; he wants to relax and to converse with them on their level. Gasquet might well be astonished at such an attitude on the part of an abbot and probably refuse to believe that such an event could ever take place. The point is not that Stephen’s characterization in the story is unconvincing. On the contrary, he is very much a three-dimensional figure who arouses a good deal of reader sympathy and admiration, but he is not typical of abbots in English monasteries of that period as an expert such as Gasquet describes them. Far from it, he is strictly a product of Kipling’s creative inventiveness, which is the heart of this extraordinary story.

Perhaps the most startling feature of Kipling’s fictional monastery, however, is not the degree to which its abbot departs from what was seen as the appropriate and expected behavior of such a religious leader but the extent to which each character in the story seems to be an apt representative of the author’s ideal of complete commitment to one’s “proper work,” a phrase he used in his talk at McGill University in 1907. It seems somewhat odd that in a group of monks living apart from the world so that they may concentrate on God and commit themselves totally to him that with each one of them a commitment
to God is but secondary to that individual’s commitment to his life’s work. And they are all—every one of them—nothing less than the very best at what they do. What we have in “The Eye of Allah,” then, is a monastery made up entirely of experts. Kipling makes it clear that in the cases of all of these experts, their work takes top priority, not God. “The Eye of Allah” is thus not a story in which religion plays a major role in the lives of the characters as one might expect it would in a work about a monastery. That is because Kipling’s is the monastery of a dream; he did not mean for it to be a true-to-life representation but an imaginary depiction of what he considered an ideal monastery, one that he would like to see exist but knows in reality does not exist and never has existed.

In some respects, the entire story is very much like a dream in the same sense as Kipling’s “The Army of a Dream” (1904). The author is fully aware of what he is doing, creating a setting and situations that are imaginative; they are products of the fancy rather than slices of actual life. It is highly unlikely that one would ever find a monastery like St. Illod’s. Kipling created a similar kind of unrealistic group with his mythic Masonic Lodge, “Faith and Works 5837,” which he describes in several stories including “In the Interests of the Brethren” (1918), “The Janeites” (1924), “A Madonna of the Trenches” (1924), and “Fairy-Kist” (1927). This Masonic Lodge departs in several respects from actual lodges of the time, and it is about as unlikely that one could find such a lodge as this as it is that St. Illod’s in “The Eye of Allah” is typical of thirteenth-century English monasteries. Both lodge and monastery are products of an author’s dream, that is, imaginative constructs as is the army in “The Army of a Dream.” Kipling’s monastery is no less imaginary, however, no less the product of his wishful thinking, than is the heaven that he portrayed in a poem that he published a good many years before “The Eye of Allah” as the “L’Envoi” to one of his collections of poems, The Seven Seas (1896):

When Earth’s last picture is painted and the tubes are twisted and dried,  
When the oldest colours have faded, and the youngest critic has died,  
We shall rest, and faith, we shall need it—lie down for an aeon or two,  
Till the Master of All Good Workmen shall put us to work anew.  
And those that were good shall be happy: they shall sit in a golden chair;  
They shall splash at a ten-league canvas with brushes of comets’ hair.  
They shall find real saints to draw from—Magdalene, Peter, and Paul;  
They shall work for an age at a sitting and never be tired at all!  
And only The Master shall praise us, and only The Master shall blame;  
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work for fame,
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his separate star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees it for the God of Things as They are!\textsuperscript{18}

This poem (usually called “When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted”) would have been a more appropriate prelude to “The Eye of Allah” than “Untimely,” the poem with which Kipling introduces the story in \textit{Debits and Credits}. It is not that “Untimely” is irrelevant to the story. Far from it; it is a fine poetic statement of the story’s most obvious theme, which is that there is a predestined time for important events (such as the appearance of the microscope) and the time will not be changed: “Heaven delivers on earth the Hour that cannot be thwarted.”\textsuperscript{19} Any attempt to move up that heaven-proclaimed hour would be futile. Therefore, the time frame in which “The Eye of Allah” takes place was not that appointed for the microscope to come into the Western world even if it would benefit an individual or all of humankind. The story deals with an incident in which an attempt is made to thwart the “Hour” but fails because of the wisdom of the abbot of an English monastery.

Such is the most apparent meaning of “The Eye of Allah,” but as is the case with a good many other works by Kipling, the overt is merely a front, a kind of disguise, for the covert, which is made up of ideas that force their way to the surface through the facade of the obvious message of the story. What “The Eye of Allah” is really about at its core is precisely the same as what “When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted” is about. “When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted” is not a religious poem about how God rewards those who have been “good”—that is, moral—in life any more than “The Eye of Allah” is a religious story. The phrase “Those that were good” appears to be a simplistic judgment using words that might describe a child who has been “good” before Christmas and deserves toys as presents. The deeper implication is that Kipling is not referring to those who have led righteous lives as usually thought of and thus have earned the right to go to heaven but those who have been “good” in another sense, good at what they do, good at their chosen work. Line 9 of the poem, “And only The Master shall praise us, and only The Master shall blame,” originally read, “And only Rembrandt shall teach us and only Van Dyck shall blame,” indicating that at least at one time, Kipling thought of “the Master” not as God but as a master craftsman in his chosen work.\textsuperscript{20}

The heaven of a dream that Kipling depicts in the poem is reserved for “All Good Workmen,” not just any righteous person and not merely painters. That particular form of work is a metaphor for all “proper
work,” and the poem describes an ideal, the heaven of a dream for those “workmen” who have lived a life dedicated to their calling. In such a hereafter, they shall be able to devote themselves to their work without ceasing, without annoying interruptions, and, most important, without having to worry about carping critics who do not know what they are talking about. They will be admirably independent. They will crave neither money nor fame but will work entirely for the joy that comes from the work itself. Practicality they will value highly just as they did when they were on earth—always close to the real, to things as they are. In the heaven of a dream, they shall have an even greater opportunity to see and deal in realities. They will exist in a community of those who share their love of work, but when Kipling writes that “each, in his separate star, / Shall draw the Thing as he sees it [italics mine] for the God of Things as They are!” he is pointing up his conviction not only that each “workman” has a distinctive, independent way of seeing but also that no one can expect to communicate fully and completely all that his or her vision incorporates to anyone but “the God of Things as They are.”

Four basic strands of thought—ideals, really—run through “When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted”: 1) dedication to one’s proper work as a basis for establishing a strong sense of personal identity and thus independence; 2) a kind of fellowship of kindred spirits under the guidance and command of a benevolent leader, himself a master craftsman; 3) the importance of having “real saints to draw from,” a phrase that smacks of Kipling’s idea expressed in numerous of his writings that practicality is the essential ingredient in the ideal way of living and working; and 4. seeing in a way that others do not. These four principal concerns of “When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted” are also the main themes of “The Eye of Allah.”

§ § §

The story begins with a description of two monks whose independence is established by their having found their callings and their refusal to follow any others, even if what they know to be the right work for them is not in accord with the jobs officially connected with the titles they bear. The Cantor of St. Illod’s is “far too enthusiastic a musician to concern himself with the Library,” which according to Gasquet was the responsibility of that person who carries the title of Cantor.21 This monastery being what it is, however, this particular Cantor is free to ignore the usual duties of one in his position and to respond to his
calling as a musician. For him, music comes before everything else, even God and the traditional role of Cantor. The seriousness and intensity that go into his efforts to direct choir practice at the monastery are impressively clear in the account of his instruction to the members of the choir and the results he obtains from this group. Those in the company of the Abbot—John, Thomas, and two guests visiting St. Illod’s, Roger of Salerno and Roger Bacon—overhear the Cantor speaking to the choir and then the music they produce. Stephen comments: “Our Cantor gives them no rest.... Stand by this pillar and we’ll hear what he’s driving them at now.” Drive them he does, as “the Cantor’s hard voice” instructs them, hard because he is probably aware that the Abbot and his dinner guests are listening but mainly because of the importance of the music to him personally and the necessity of its being preformed as it should be:

“Remember all!... This is the soul of Bernard himself, attacking our evil world. Take it quicker than yesterday, and throw all your words clean-bitten from you. In the loft there! Begin!” The organ broke out for an instant, alone and raging. Then the voices crashed together into that first fierce line of the “De Contemptu Mundi.”

As Kipling’s description of the choir’s rehearsal continues, the effect is to reveal increasingly the skill and devotion that the Cantor brings to his self-appointed work as musician and director of the monastery’s music program. He may well be, as Stephen suspects, putting on something of a show for his important listeners because of his vanity, but still his knowledge of and dedication to music are apparent though vain he may be.

Clement, the Sub-Cantor, has taken over as librarian and considers it his proper work. He is as dedicated to this particular job as librarian as the Cantor is to the role of music director. Clement finds himself fulfilled, and he is the best there is at it. John Otho tells him: “Clement, there’s no Librarian from Durham to Torre fit to clean up after you.” This is his proper work; he is dedicated to it body and soul; and outside of that role, as John indicates to him, he is but “the master-fool.” Clement is not insulted by John’s remark because he is content never to work outside the library (or “Scriptorium”). Outside, he replies to John, “I never go,” by which he implies that he is so committed to his calling as librarian that he does not dabble in other areas. In fact, he “had been excused from digging in the garden, lest it should mar his wonderful book-binding hands.” Not only is each character seemingly an expert at what he does, but the Abbot allows each person to find his own
proper work and to follow that particular calling. For Kipling, that is an ideal situation, a kind of heaven on earth.

The underlying reason that Stephen de Sautré of “The Eye of Allah” is not representative of medieval abbots as Gasquet portrays them is that his true interest and dedication are elsewhere. In a telling description of him, Kipling writes: “A fair huntsman and hawker, a reasonable disciplinarian but a man of science above all, and a Doctor of Medicine under one Ranulphus, Canon of St. Paul’s, his heart was more in the monastery’s hospital work than its religious.” As John puts it: “Our Stephen’s *physicus* before *sacerdos*, always.”25 This is not to say that Stephen is a man without a strong belief in God but to say that he is not a “disciple” in the sense that the Apostle Paul is in Kipling’s stories “The Church That Was at Antioch” (1929) and “The Manner of Men” (1930). He exhibits that indispensable ingredient in the makeup of an independent person, self-ownership. In this he leads the way at St. Il-lod’s, Kipling’s dream monastery, where the inhabitants are all their own men who have, independent of each other, their individual callings but who are at the same time keenly aware of the “corporate spirit,” as Kipling called it, and contribute to it. Kipling used that phrase, the “corporate spirit,” in an address that he delivered on 11 October 1923 at University College, Dundee, entitled “The Classics and the Sciences.”26 He emphasized that independence was well worth the effort to pursue, as he had said in another talk that he had given just the day before at the University of St. Andrews, but he indicated that in this particular speech he wished to stress the importance of what he called “association and union.” In his opening remarks, he confesses: “I find myself in an awkward position.” He is referring to the potentially embarrassing situation in which a speaker appears to be blatantly contradicting himself by openly taking two opposing positions on an issue when speaking in two different places. He goes on to say:

But I am consoled by the thought that I am not the only person who has said one thing one day and another on the next. My Rectorial Address [at St. Andrews] dealt entirely with the advantages of independence as a possession necessary and desirable in itself. Today I come before you, equally convinced of the necessity and desirability of interdependence combined with association and union.27

He never spoke more self-revealingly, for he was actually describing his own eagerness for fellowship. He was, to be sure, almost fanatical about his privacy—intent upon maintaining his individualism, his independence—but he was also so social-minded that he belonged to
numerous clubs in London, cherished good company and conversa-
tion, and always valued his connection with Freemasonry, a lodge of
which in 1885 he joined in India before he was old enough to qualify
officially for membership.28

To illustrate and prove the compatibility and even connectedness of
these two aspects of personality, independence and association, he uses
the two affiliated colleges, St. Andrews, which stressed the humanities,
the “classics,” and University College, which stressed “Natural Science
and Medicine.” Yet they pursued the same goal. It is true, he admits,
that persons who meticulously guard and preserve their independence
and follow their own calling as they perceive it will naturally assume
that the particular work to which they are devoted is more important
than anything else; consequently, they will sometimes appear antisocial
because of impatience with others’ endeavors and points of view. Nev-
evertheless, he stresses that both independence and association should
be cultivated.

In “The Classics and the Sciences,” Kipling did not mention thir-
teenth-century monastic life as an example of how independence and
association can coexist probably because it would perhaps seem odd
to his audience that those who renounce the world for a life dedicated
solely to God could be called “independent.” Yet it was not long after
he gave this speech that he wrote his story of an unusual monastery. In
“The Eye of Allah,” the group lives and eats together each day in close
association exhibiting the “corporate spirit,” but they engage in what
they know to be the right work for each of them, what they are truly
gifted at doing and nothing else.

John Otho (“better known as John of Burgos”) is a prime example
of such a person. He is markedly talented as an artist: “he seemed to
carry all the Arts under his hand.” Consequently, he is allowed to leave
the monastery on trips, stay as long away as he wishes, and return
whenever he is ready to do so, all this without needing or asking for the
Abbot’s permission.29 He is characterized as independent, even oddly
independent, one might say, for a monk in a monastery. Throughout
the story he is portrayed as a superb artist, original and gifted beyond
measure, and a staunch individualist. His life is in his craft, his calling.
Above all, he, like Kipling himself, seeks originality and finds it. The
reason that he goes to so much trouble to paint evil spirits as they have
never been represented before is that, as he explains to the Abbot, he is
searching for a fresh way of showing “devils.” To Stephen he exclaims:
“I’m weary of our Church-pattern devils. They’re only apes and goats
and poultry conjoined. Good enough for plain red-and-black Hells and Judgment Day—but not for me.” He sees no purpose in pursuing art if one cannot be original. When his mistress dies in childbirth along with the child, he turns not to God for solace and support in his grief but to his work, as did Kipling himself when he was grief stricken. He does not have to be reminded of what the Abbot tells him when he learns of John’s great loss: “For pain of the soul there is, outside God’s Grace, but one drug; and that is a man’s craft, learning, or other helpful motion of his own mind.” John replies: “That is coming to me,” and the next fair day he goes out with his “travelling sketch-books under his left elbow” to work, and he “sunk himself past all recollections in his Great Luke,” his current artistic project.30

What John Otho paints is unique. No evil spirits or “devils” (as he calls them) have ever been drawn like those in his illuminations for the biblical Book of Luke. When he views some of John’s work Stephen says, “I’ve never seen the like of this grey shadow-work… How came you by it?” John’s answer is one Kipling himself would give: “Non nobis!” That is, something he cannot explain guided his hand. It was not actually his doing, he claims, “not knowing that he was a generation or so ahead of his time in the use of that medium.”31 Kipling would probably have responded in a like manner if someone said to him, as the Abbot says to John: “You should break off every two hours…. Two hours is all that a man can carry the edge of his eye.” John answers in a manner that is strikingly like something Kipling would say: “For copyists—yes…. But when a man’s work takes him, he must go on till it lets him go.” The shrewd, extraordinarily well-educated, thoughtful Roger Bacon immediately recognizes what John means by “when a man’s work takes him,” and he observes: “Yes, that is the Demon of Socrates.”32 It is also the “Daemon” of Kipling. When the Daemon of Kipling was in control, he claimed, it took him over completely, and he remained under its command until it left him.

John is a kind of thirteenth-century Fra Lippo Lippi (1406–1469), as Robert Browning portrayed him, and in being that he is also like the author who created him, for Kipling on one occasion referred to himself as the “child” of Fra Lippo Lippi.33 John, like Fra Lippo Lippi, is determined to be independent and is devoted more to his art, at which he is singularly gifted, than to God although he is a monk.34

Brother Thomas, who is in charge of the monastery’s infirmary, feels called to care for the sick. No one is better at it. He gives the departing John “a list of drugs that he was to bring back from Spain by hook,
crook, or lawful purchase,” a comment that suggests the earnestness with which he takes his job as infirmarian. He is that—infirmarian—first and foremost. Regarding his relationship with God, he is uneasy at best. In fact, he admits to John after his return from Spain that he has often thought that “in some matters,” presumably referring to his obtaining the necessary drugs to treat the ill, “I might be a strong thief.” When John asks him why he has never taken orders, that is, has never become a monk but has remained a “lay-brother” for the eleven years that he has resided at St. Illod’s, he answers that he is “not worthy.”

His conscience-driven doubts do not extend to his work as infirmarian, however. He plays that role with total dedication; it defines him, but at the same time, he remains within the group, for he needs it as much as it needs him. In this, he resembles John, who is about as independent as one can imagine with his artistic practice and concepts, but who always returns after his journeys into the fragmented outside world to the cohesive group of the monastery, which receives him with love, understanding, and above all, tolerance.

Even minor characters in “The Eye of Allah” are portrayed as the best at the skill that makes them stand out as individuals—as independent though at the same time imbued with the “corporate spirit.” Seventy-year-old Brother Martin, Senior Copyist, is so gifted at his job that John always calls on him “for really good page-work.” Martin does not think of what he does as tedious and monotonous but takes rare pride in his ability to do it so well. He is a truly pious Christian, having memorized all the Gospels of the Bible, but his sense of self—his identity—comes from the work that he does with perfection. Like the rest of those whom Kipling describes in the monastery of a dream, Brother Martin enjoys a pronounced sense of individuality, of independence, while at the same time feeling that he has found the proper place in life for him to exist in “union” and “association” with others, this particular monastery.

Although St. Illod’s departs in several ways from what Kipling learned in his research about actual English monasteries of the thirteenth century, there is a good chance that what got him interested in monastic life to begin with, what made him decide to write about a monastery, was perhaps something he read in Gasquet’s book about the nature of monastic life that clicked with his own predilection for “association.” Gasquet insists that such an existence was in every respect collective and shared:
The monastic rule, at least after the days of St. Benedict, was eminently social. Both in theory and in practice the regular observance of the great abbeys and other religious houses was based upon the principle of common life. Monks and other religious were not solitaries or hermits, but they lived and worked and prayed together in an association as close as it is possible to conceive. The community or corporation was the sole entity.\(^{37}\)

These words would greatly appeal to Kipling, who in spite of his reserve about personal matters and his reluctance to command attention, was much inclined toward associating with groups with whom he felt he had much in common.

Thus monastic life, in this particular respect, more than likely seemed to Kipling the ideal setting to stress the importance of fellowship and “association.” Gasquet’s comments about the social aspect of monastic life could well have attracted Kipling and have furnished him with the idea of setting his story in a monastery, but on the other hand, he found that he had to depart from the rest of what Gasquet has to say about monastic life in the passage only part of which is quoted above. Gasquet goes on to write: “Individual interests were merged in that of the general body, and the life of an individual member was in reality merely an item in the common life of the convent as a whole. This is practically true in all forms of regular [monastic] life, without regard to a variety of observance or rule.”\(^{38}\) This aspect of monastic life, as Gasquet described it, left little room for independence, that is, for those who wished to follow their own callings; therefore, Kipling found that a medieval monastery would work well for him as the setting for a group representing the corporate spirit but that he had to deviate from what Gasquet describes as the total surrender of “individual interests” by those who enter a monastery. His solution was to create a monastery of his own, a dream where independence was respected and even encouraged.

All of these characters, members of St. Illod’s Monastery, are devoted to their work and thus manifest Kipling’s concept of self-ownership and its companion value, the corporate spirit, but they share another characteristic as well: they are all anchored in practicality as the basis, the method, of their work. When Kipling writes that the Sub-Cantor “idolised every detail”\(^{39}\) of his duties in the monastery library, he is in essence conveying the impression that Clement is eminently practical, for love of detail to Kipling equated with interest in that which is manifestly useful. To venerate detail carries generally the same meaning, at least for Kipling, as to be “deadly persistent” in one’s work, which is precisely the phrase used to describe another character in “The Eye of
Allah,” Thomas the Infirmarian. Both Clement and Thomas are efficient and proficient in their respective callings largely because they are detail oriented. They are empiricists.

At the very center of the story remains the artist, John Otho, for whom practicality is the heart of his craft and his personal life. He paints from “patterns,” as he calls them, patterns from his actual observation and experience. His mistress in Spain is the pattern, or model, for the Virgin Mary in one of his illuminations. Snowflakes viewed through the magnifying glass that John brought back with him from Spain on a previous visit six years before the time of the story and showed to Thomas become his model for what John terms his “diaper-work” of some of his illuminations. The microscope enables John to carry his originality even further than did the Eye of Allah, the magnifying glass, by his observing through it the living creatures in a drop of polluted water. They are his models for the “devils” of his “Great Luke” illuminations. The surgeon Roger of Salerno views these devils on John’s drawings and proclaims that they must be the products of a person under the influence of drugs, but the practical John replies: “In my craft, Salerno, we dare not drug. It kills hand and eye. My shapes are to be seen honestly, in nature.” He paints through observation, staying close to what he sees in nature and on the faces of those around him. The reason that John always remembers to have absolution before travel is that he considers it a kind of insurance policy for him, not an act of religious devotion. Receiving absolution “was a precaution John no more omitted on the eve of his travels than he did the recutting of the tonsure which he had provided himself with in his youth, somewhere near Ghent. The mark gave him privilege of clergy at a pinch, and a certain consideration on the road always.” Thus John, with his strong bent toward the practical, has found his tonsure to be useful to him.

John’s proclivity toward practicality is nowhere better illustrated than when at the suggestion of the Abbot he gives an explanation as to why Apuleius would write “if a man eat fasting of the juice of the cut-leaved buttercup … his soul will leave his body laughing.” Roger of Salerno is outraged at this claim and goes into considerable detail to show how Apuleius was guilty of telling “a lie more dangerous than truth, since truth of a sort is in it.” After the surgeon’s lengthy discourse, the Abbot “cocked an eyebrow toward John, and says to him: “How think you?” John’s response contains the essence of common sense:

I’d say Apuleius in all these years might have been betrayed by his copyists. They take shortcuts to save ‘emselves trouble. Put case that Apuleius wrote
the soul seems to leave the body laughing, after this poison. There’s not three copyists in five (my judgment) would not leave out the “seems to.” For who’d question Apuleius? If it seemed so to him, so it must be.45

John is an empiricist version of the artist, and as such, to him “men were but matter for drawings.” When Stephen de Sautré destroys the microscope that has enabled John to draw devils for his “Great Luke,” the artist is the only one of the four men witnessing the act who does not object. It does not matter to him because in practical terms, he is finished with the “shapes” that he has drawn from looking through the strange implement that even more than the Eye of Allah “made small things larger.” When Roger Bacon attempts to enlist John’s aid in arguing against the destruction of the microscope, the artist rather indifferently remarks: “My trade’s the outside of things…. I have my patterns,” by which he means that he has made use of the microscope and no longer needs it.46

John has no sentimental ideas about his fellow man, no romantic theories about the spiritual capacity of human beings, and he is little troubled, if at all, by his conscience—as is Thomas, who has been greatly disturbed over dreams he has been experiencing after having read Varro’s De Re Rustica in which the theory is espoused that “certain small animals which the eye cannot follow enter the body by the nose and mouth, and set up grave diseases.” Thomas is impressed with the theory, which he considers the possible answer—a practical answer—to a host of questions about how illness comes about, especially the widespread spotted fever currently plaguing England and the rest of Europe. However, he has not been able to observe such “small animals” for himself, and besides his not being able to corroborate the theory by observation, he realizes that such an idea as Varro expresses “is not in Scripture.”47 Later when he sees for himself these tiny creatures through the microscope, and when he thinks that observation has confirmed the theory, he, like the good empiricist that he is, is greatly relieved and falls on his knees in exclamatory thankfulness for the experience of corroboration.

It is no coincidence that all of the characters of Kipling’s dream monastery are demonstrably practical—if in somewhat different ways—for Rudyard Kipling was the high priest of practicality. He declared it the most underrated of all virtues, and he wrote with consistent praise a great deal about the practical people of the world, those devoted to a craft, people who work with their hands as well as their brains, those enthusiastic and knowledgeable about technology, in his own terms,
“the Sons of Martha” (1907). He believed practicality to be the cure for disillusionment and the way to enlightenment. Indeed, it had for him a redemptive role.

Henry James (1843–1916) was an avid admirer of Kipling’s work in the early days of their acquaintance and believed him to be “the most complete man of genius … that I have ever known.” The more that Kipling wrote about things mechanical and concentrated on those for whom practicality is a way of life as well as work, however, the more James withdrew his admiration. In a letter to a friend, he wrote:

My view of his [Kipling’s] prose future has much shrunken in the light of one’s increasingly observing how little of life he can make use of…. Almost nothing of the complicated soul or of the female form or of any question of shades—which latter constitutes, to my sense, the real formative literary discipline. In his earliest time I thought he perhaps contained the seeds of an English Balzac; but I have given that up in proportion as he has come steadily from the less simple in subject to the more simple—from the Anglo-Indians to the natives, from the natives to the Tommies, from the Tommies to the quadrupeds, from the quadrupeds to the fish, and from the fish to the engines and screws.

James did not understand what was what going on inside of Kipling when he devoted much of his writing to these matters; he did not understand that Kipling’s “Daemon” was in league with his practical sense and that one could not function without the other. When they worked together—his Daemon and his common sense—Kipling knew that they were instrumental in his producing his best work. It is no wonder that he cherished these two separate sides to his head but a pity that the usually astute and sensitive James could not grasp that his friend Rudyard believed that there were deep, underlying principles involved in his profound respect for practicality, for him a kind of metaphysics of practicality, which was worth considering, especially in view of the fact that Henry’s brilliant brother, William, was the pioneer of a school of philosophy that advocated and promoted energetically the same basic idea that was so dear to Kipling.

William James (1842–1910) clearly understood that he and Kipling shared a fundamental philosophy, what has come to be known as Pragmatism, with which the name of William James is intimately associated. He was its best, most famous spokesman. While Kipling was living in Brattleboro, Vermont, he and his wife Carrie entertained William and his wife as their houseguests in June 1895. Kipling not only knew William personally and formed a friendship with him, but he knew a good deal about him from his connection with the highly respected British Society for Psychical Research. James was one of the early presi-
dents of that organization as were others of Kipling’s acquaintance. William was greatly interested in spiritualism and psychical research from a scientific and practical standpoint and was an ardent admirer of its founders, especially Frederick W. H. Myers. Kipling’s sister Alice (“Trix”) was a clairvoyant known as “Mrs. Holland” in whom the Society took great interest.

William James had tried at first to hide his admiration for Kipling from his somewhat fastidious brother Henry, who was famous for what William called his “exquisitely refined taste.” He strongly suspected that Henry would find Kipling’s subject matter somewhat repulsive. When to his surprise, however, he discovered that Henry (at least at this point) was also much impressed with Kipling, he expressed to his brother his conviction that this new writer on the scene was “more of a Shakespeare than any one yet in this generation of ours.” He added in the same letter that as soon as he encountered the writings of Kipling, he realized that he had found a kindred spirit: “I felt the other day, finishing ‘the Light that Failed,’ and an Ethical Address to be given at Yale College simultaneously, that there was no essential difference between R.K. & Myself....”

It is readily understandable that he felt this close affinity, for William James’s definition of Pragmatism comes so close to being Kipling’s philosophy of life and artistic expression that it is odd that the author of “The Eye of Allah” has not been more closely associated with the author of “What Pragmatism Means”:

Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air of possibilities, of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth.

William James was Pragmatism’s most effective voice in philosophy. Pragmatism’s counterpart in fiction and poetry was Rudyard Kipling, though he was not given to using the term. In a sense, “The Eye of Allah” is Kipling’s tribute to Pragmatism, for St. Illod’s is the monastery of a dream because, in part, those who reside there, from the Abbot
down to its lay brothers, are Pragmatists as William James defines that method of thinking and acting. Theirs is the empiricist temperament.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in “The Eye of Allah” the two guests visiting at the time the story takes place, Roger Bacon and Roger of Salerno, seem right at home at St. Illod’s, a monastery made up of experts who take their personal identity from their calling and are distinctly independent yet highly sensitive to the need for “association and union,” as Kipling termed it in his address at Dundee. Only in a dream, however, could these two figures of history with enormous reputations be visiting a monastery at the same time, for in real life they were not contemporaries. Kipling chose them for the monastery of his dream, that is, a monastery as he would like to see one, just as the army in “The Army of a Dream” (1904) is the kind of army that he would like to see, an ideal one. He chose them principally because he knew from his research that they each had a body-and-soul commitment to their calling but that their fierce independence was combined with their proclivity for social intercourse, their recognition of the communal spirit. Both were, in fact, members of corporate entities. Roger of Salerno was a prominent member of the faculty of the famous medical school in Salerno, Roger Bacon a Franciscan friar.

It is clear in “The Eye of Allah” that Stephen has known both Rogers for some time. Roger of Salerno is no loner but an avid conversationalist and especially likes to speak on topics dear to his heart. When he begins to hold forth on the subject of how a lie is of the most dangerous kind when “truth of a sort is in it,” the Abbot whispers to the others, “He’s away!” as if Stephen has heard Roger of Salerno give this particular speech in social situations before. It is the sort of thing one man might quietly say—in a friendly and humorous way—to others who make up the captive audience of someone riding his hobby horse at a club such as the Athenaeum. That Stephen is also a friend of Roger Bacon is indicated from what the Abbot says when Bacon is making his pitch for preserving the microscope. Referring to Roger Bacon in particular, he says: “What Stephen de Sautré knows, you his friends know also.” He makes this statement after Roger Bacon has couched his plea for the preservation of the microscope in terms of their long association: “For old friendship’s sake—Stephen!”

Kipling’s knowledge of Roger Bacon and the author’s decision to make that historical figure a character in one of his stories probably came about after Sir William Osler (1849–1919), the noted Canadian physician who had become Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford
University, asked him to write a tribute to Bacon to be read at a luncheon on 10 June 1914 after the presentation of a statue of the renowned Franciscan friar to the Oxford Museum of Natural History marking the 700th anniversary of his birth. In a letter of 10 May 1914, Kipling admitted to his friend Osler that at that point he did not know very much about Roger Bacon: “But seriously, much as I should love to be of use to you I fear I am no good in this matter. I don’t know Bacon except from the popular legend.” Even though Kipling refused the invitation, Osler had nevertheless stirred up his curiosity, and he evidently started to read up on Roger Bacon and English monastic life of the thirteenth century. In fact, in his letter to Osler, he asked the doctor to send him a copy of the essay on Bacon that Osler had apparently informed Kipling that he had agreed to compose. It was to become a part of an impressive volume of essays edited by A. G. Little to commemorate the 700th birthday of Roger Bacon. Osler was a member of the Executive Committee dealing with this important occasion. His name is listed on the first page of Little’s preface to the volume along with those of other members. Little states that the committee proposed three activities: “(1) to erect a statue of Roger Bacon (by Mr. Hope Pinker) in the University Museum; (2) to issue the present memorial volume of essays; (3) to raise a fund for the publication of Roger Bacon’s works.” Little goes on to say in the next paragraph that the volume of essays corresponds with the previously announced plan for it “except in two particulars,” the first of which is that “Sir William Osler … [was] unfortunately compelled to postpone his promised article to a future occasion.”

It is likely that Osler never got around to finishing the essay he had originally intended to be part of the memorial volume. It could well be, however, that Kipling received from Osler or from elsewhere a copy of the book, for it is a splendid source for anyone who wishes to become familiar with Roger Bacon, even someone who, as Kipling confessed, knew him only “from the popular legend.” Since Osler and Kipling had become friends and Osler was a member of the committee responsible for the volume, it is quite possible that in place of the essay that he had intended to present to his famous author friend, he sent a copy of the book instead. Little’s introductory essay, “On Roger Bacon’s Life and Works,” is general enough not to cause the reader to become bogged down in philosophical, scientific, or historical information and specific enough to serve as a valuable tutorial for those who wish for a crash course in what Roger Bacon was all about. Bacon’s opinions and the
aspects of his temperament on which the essay focuses are precisely those that Kipling emphasizes in his portrayal of Bacon in “The Eye of Allah.”

In commenting on Bacon’s tendency toward rather harsh criticism of all that he considered standing in the way of humanity’s search for truth, Little remarks in connection with Bacon’s *Compendium Studii Philosophiae*: “It includes violent attacks on all estates of the world—the papal court, all religious orders without exception, and clergy and universities, kings and princes, and lawyers.” Kipling does not hesitate to depict Roger Bacon, a Franciscan friar, attacking the Catholic Church itself in the very presence of the abbot of one of its monasteries. At one point in the story, Bacon points out that it is partly “Mother Church” that holds back the advancement of truth:

“There is no danger of justice”; the Friar spoke bitterly. “But at least Man might be suffered to go forward in his Art or his thought. Yet if Mother Church sees or hears him move anyward, what says she? ‘No!’ Always ‘No!’”

Much of Kipling’s characterization of Roger Bacon—both his ideas and his personality traits—parallels the description of him and information about him included in Little’s introductory chapter to *Roger Bacon: Essays*, such as the following passage in which Little quotes extensively from an address by Professor Robert Adamson delivered in 1876 at Owens College, Manchester, England, dealing with Bacon’s *Opus Majus*:

Part I is an exposition of the causes which have hindered the progress of true philosophy…. These … are four in number: (1) Dependence on authority … (2) Yielding to established custom … (3) Allowing weight to popular opinion … (4) Concealment of real ignorance with pretense of knowledge…. As Bacon bitterly [italics mine] says, the prevailing mode of argument in his time was: “this is affirmed by our superiors; this is the customary opinion; this is the popular view; therefore it must be admitted.” It may seem but a small thing for a writer to reject authority, but one must reflect on what that meant in Bacon’s time. It meant absolute revolt against the whole spirit of scholasticism; it was the assertion of freedom of thought, of the claim of science to push forward to its conclusions, regardless of fancied consequences, with implicit trust in the grand law that all truth is ultimately harmonious. Over and over again Bacon dwells upon the baneful influence of authority…. He points out that the Fathers, after all, were men, and used the same faculty of reason that men now possess.

In “The Eye of Allah,” Bacon’s most passionate outbursts reveal his strong objection to the slavish reliance on so-called authorities, that is, his conviction that logic alone, as valuable as it is, is inadequate without “positive knowledge,” as Little puts it, which comes not from reading
established authorities on the subject but from one’s own experience and experiments. After an emotional outburst by Roger of Salerno in which he fundamentally agrees that “Mother Church” stifles truth and progress, Bacon responds:

“And not Mother Church only!” the Friar chimed in. “Every way we are barred—barred by the words of some man, dead a thousand years, which are held final. Who is any son of Adam that his one say-so should close a door towards truth? I would not except even Peter Peregrinus, my own great teacher.”

Repeatedly in “The Eye of Allah,” Roger Bacon insists upon empiricism—the application of observation and experiment rather than mere theory in the search for truth. He considers the principal flaw in the science and philosophy of his day that in reaching their conclusions, those who profess to be seeking truth are “Neither staying to observe, nor to confirm observation by experiment.” When the surgeon, Roger of Salerno, asks Thomas how “we are any nearer to a cure” for a fever they have been discussing even when it is known that the malady is caused by “the little animals of Varro” (germs or microbes that “be invisible”), Roger Bacon breaks in with his own practical explanation: “‘By experiment’—the Friar wheeled round on them suddenly. ‘By reason and experiment. The one is useless without the other.’” He learned at an early age the same lesson as the one that the little truffle hunter in Kipling’s story “‘Teem’” got from his mother. He learned to value “a practical philosophy without which even Genius is but a bird of one wing.” In “The Eye of Allah,” Kipling’s Roger Bacon is thus very much the same man as characterized in Little’s essay. Little indicates that Bacon’s Opus Majus

was a treatise written with the definite object of persuading the practical man of the practical usefulness of “wisdom,” of scientific knowledge and method. The parts into which it is divided are entitled “On the Usefulness of the Study of Languages,” “On the Usefulness of Mathematics,” and so forth, and at the end of each section the author points out practical applications.… Unquestionably, then, Roger Bacon was an early Pragmatist, as William James defined it, as was the other historical figure of the story, Roger of Salerno, whose famous book on surgery, Practica Chirurgiae, stands out for its practicality. It shows little respect for the accepted authorities of the time; it does not bother to cite their theories on anatomy and medical procedures but gets right to the point—expresses in fresh language (because of clarity, directness, and brevity) surgeries for various health problems. His book quickly became the most important text on surgery in the prominent medical schools of the time,
notably Salerno, Montpellier, and Bologna. It was groundbreaking not only because it raised surgery to a new and higher level of respect but also because it was highly practical in its approach. Although Roger of Salerno’s personality as it is portrayed in “The Eye of Allah” is quite different from Roger Bacon’s, Kipling probably included the former among those who see the microscope that John has with him because on the one hand he is so much like Roger Bacon in his total commitment to his calling, in his independence, in his awareness of the importance of the “corporate spirit,” and in his insistence on practicality but on the other hand is a stark contrast to Roger Bacon in the way he sees the microscope. Each of the “Good Workmen” as Kipling writes in “When Earth’s Last Picture Is Painted,” in “his separate star, / Shall draw the Thing as he sees it.…”

“The Eye of Allah” is very much about seeing: each of the men who attend the Abbot’s dinner, including Stephen himself, lives and thinks independently (on “a separate star”) despite their all being in the same sky, that is, sharing a common religious belief, and they therefore see the significance of this new instrument, the microscope, differently and react differently. Each is, metaphorically speaking, drawing the thing as he sees it. Seeing becomes a major motif that lends cohesiveness to the story.

In his autobiography, Kipling tells how his eyes were opened by his “Daemon” when he was trying to write “The Eye of Allah,” which he describes as being “about a mediaeval artist, a monastery, and the premature discovery of the microscope.” He recalls that the story repeatedly “went dead under my hand, and for the life of me I could not see why. I put it away and waited. Then said my Daemon—and I was meditating something else at the time—‘Treat it as an illuminated manuscript.’ I had ridden off on hard black-and-white decoration, instead of pumicing the whole thing ivory-smooth, and loading it with thick colour and gilt.”

What Kipling seems to be saying in this enigmatic passage is that he had tried to indicate in the story that the “mediaeval artist” of the monastery that he was writing about drew in black and white. As long as he tried to describe the artist’s drawings this way, the story “went dead” on him. For some reason unexplained, he continually ran into dead ends. Nor does he explain why the illustrations that the artist was working on were so important in the story.

After a while, he had an inspiration, but it is not clear precisely what that inspiration was. When Kipling writes that his “Daemon” instruct-
ed him to “treat *it* as an illuminated manuscript,” it is unclear what the pronoun “it” refers to. Does it refer to the drawings or to the entire story? If the latter, what exactly does that mean? What is meant by his “pumicing the whole thing ivory-smooth, and loading it with thick colour and gilt”? What does “the whole thing” refer to?

At any rate, he apparently saw what was wrong and once he did what his Daemon instructed—whatever that was—it made all the difference. He was able to finish writing the story to his satisfaction. He remembers the episode as a kind of epiphany, but exactly why it was that—a brilliant insight—he does not even try to communicate. In other words, he is recounting that he changed courses in writing the story, but he gives inadequate explanations of what was going on in his mind and imagination. Obviously, he considered it a stunning personal experience in seeing something clearly that he did not see before, that is, did not understand before, but he fails to explain what it is that he saw, and we as readers do not know. We are left only with the impression that he thinks his “Daemon” was responsible for seeing how he should write “The Eye of Allah.”

Though puzzling, the passage from *Something of Myself* is instructive in at least two ways. First, it reveals Kipling’s interest in the phenomenon of “seeing,” penetrating into truth in flashes of insight; second, it shows how little he was interested in trying to explain these experiences of seeing except in general or roundabout ways—as if he thought the attempt to communicate them explicitly would be futile. He pretty much said that in a letter of 22 May 1926 to an American painter, Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932), who had become his friend:

> I find it difficult to hope that human beings can communicate and pass on their personal experiences…. For example—in your own case—how on earth or out of it do you hope to pass on the comprehension and knowledge (I leave out the technique altogether, because, you’ll concede, that can’t be passed on) which enables you to see the depth and significance of a mere skyline at a certain hour of the day over a certain landscape? You can, by picture, make people see and think of certain things and along certain planes but (as I see it) you can’t pass on the subconscious personal experiences of life that made you personally capable of seeing.

He was thus fascinated with the phenomenon of individual or personal seeing but keenly aware that the perceiver cannot explain the experience in such a way as to “pass on the subconscious personal experiences of life” that were behind the person’s seeing as he or she does.
Throughout “The Eye of Allah,” references to seeing recur with striking frequency. As John Otho shows his illustrations for the biblical Book of Luke to Stephen de Sautré, he instructs him: “And see again! The devil that came out of the dumb man.” When the conversation turns to John’s upcoming journey to Spain, he explains to the Abbot that people in that country “from Seville to Granada … live lovingly enough together—Spaniard, Moor, and Jew. Ye see, we ask no questions.” Characters in the story frequently request that others “see” or indicate what they have seen. The Abbot calls John’s attention to a cake of dried poppy juice and remarks: “This has power to cut off all pain from a man’s body,” to which John replies: “I have seen it.” John’s instruction to the senior copyist of the monastery, Brother Martin, is “Then see” as he lays out before him a sheet of flawless vellum to be used in his illuminated Luke.74

Most of the characters of the story use this same word, see, with unusual frequency, suggesting a kind of curious continuity among them. The Sub-Cantor’s censure of John on one occasion begins with “see now,” and when the somewhat irascible Roger of Salerno wishes to compliment John, with whom he has been irritating much of the evening, he does so by exclaiming: “By the Snakes of Aesculapius, you see!” He can give no higher praise than to say that he sees, implying that John sees the same way as he, but in fact the surgeon is mistaken, for John has his own distinctive way of seeing. Anxious to look through the microscope that John has brought with him to the dinner at the Abbot’s house, Roger Bacon pleads, “Suffer me to see, also,” and after he examines the microscope he exclaims, “I see! I see!” The other Roger in a burst of cynicism “laughed with an old man’s malice. ‘What of Mother Church? Most Holy Mother Church? If it comes to Her ears that we have spied into Her Hell without her leave, where do we stand?’” As the Abbot of the monastery, Stephen de Sautré has the last word in the matter of what to do with the microscope. “My Sons,” he begins, “we have seen what we have seen” His decision is that although they have seen the small objects through the microscope in a different manner, the church will conclude, mistakenly, that they have all seen the same thing, namely hell, and as the Abbot puts it: “To look into Hell as we shall be judged—as we shall be proved—to have looked, is for priests only…. Nor may even priests see more in Hell than Church knows to be there.”75 Therefore, for their blasphemous looking, as the Church will interpret it, they will all be condemned, and they will be burned at
the stake. “In the eyes of Mother Church,” the Abbot says, “we have seen more than is permitted to man.”

Such references abound in the story as do comments about looking and the eyes. Roger of Salerno suspects that the devils that John has drawn are products of a drugged state, but John makes a statement that taking drugs kills the “eye.” From beginning to end, “The Eye of Allah” is saturated with such descriptions of the act of looking, showing, observing, and watching. In no other story of Kipling’s is the sense of sight more frequently referred to. Kipling has carefully woven this extensive web of references to seeing as preparation for the dramatic ending of the story based upon what the major characters see as they look at and through the microscope and react to that experience. It is here in this tour de force of a conclusion that all of the major themes come together in a grand finale of what is in effect a fictional symphony. With a single common act—looking through the microscope—each character manifests the importance to him of his calling, which has created his identity, his independence; his connection with the others; his practical bent; and his distinctive way of seeing, which contrasts with what all the others see though they are all looking at the same thing.

Roger Bacon is a man of science, and his reaction to the microscope reflects that identity. The experience for him is extremely meaningful principally because it represents a step forward in the progress of science, especially in what he terms “Art-optical.” He equates major developments in science with the betterment of his fellow human beings. Roger of Salerno is a surgeon; his interest is in what the microscope can mean in developing cures for diseases, such as that with which Anne of Norton is suffering. He sees the microscope as opening up a whole new world of medicine, and he is greatly saddened that he is old and will not live long enough to participate in this exciting development. John is, in contrast to the two Rogers, rather indifferent to what the microscope may mean for the future of science or the benefit of humankind. The instrument of making small things large, of making the invisible visible, has served its purpose for him, furnishing him with the “patterns” he needed to create original drawings. He, like Kipling himself, is not interested in doing the same thing over and over. Thomas, the infirmarian, sees in the “small animals” made visible by the microscope no devils or evil spirits; he refuses to accept the explanation that they have looked into hell and thereby committed what the church will consider an unpardonable sin. He takes an entirely different view of the microbes in a drop of polluted water: he sees them as somehow
allies of human beings, part of the same life that we all experience. It is a novel idea, different from any of the others expressed in the story. It seems to come quite directly from H. G. Wells’s The War of the Worlds, first published in 1898.

Much has been written about the effect of Kipling on Wells, for example the influence of The Jungle Book (1894) on Wells’s The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896), but it may well be that in “The Eye of Allah,” we have an instance of Wells’s influence on Kipling as reflected in Thomas’s theory that the microbes he sees through the microscope are God’s creatures and our friends. Thomas’s notion seems closely related to, if not derived from, that expressed in the following passage from Wells’s The War of the Worlds, in which aliens from Mars attempt to take over the planet Earth and nearly succeed despite all-out efforts to repel them. Then suddenly they begin to drop dead, victims of bacteria to which earthly humans have long since become immune:

> These germs of disease have taken toll of humanity since the beginning of things—taken toll of our prehuman ancestors since life began here. But by virtue of this natural selection of our kind we have developed resisting power; to no germs do we succumb without a struggle, and to many … our living frames are altogether immune. But there are no bacteria on Mars, and directly these invaders arrived [from Mars], directly they drank and fed, our microscopic allies began to work on their overthrow.

These invaders from Mars were “slain,” writes Wells, “after all man’s devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth.” Such is precisely the way Thomas sees the “germs”: as God’s creatures that promise to be the allies of humanity, not as creatures from hell. He believes that they will serve a highly practical purpose. He therefore strongly objects to the destruction of the one instrument that allows us to see these smallest creations of God, who represent life, not hell.

All of these perceptions—those of Roger Bacon, Roger of Salerno, John Otho, and Brother Thomas—have validity although no one of them can explain fully and adequately his particular vision nor convince another that his way of seeing is the correct way. They are all correct in a sense, all practical. There are no villains in this story, merely men who perceive individualistically because of what they are, because of their “subconscious personal experiences of life that made … [them] capable of seeing,” as Kipling put it in his letter to Lockwood de Forest.

It remains to consider the Abbot’s perception of the microscope and of what is in that drop of water. Actually, he makes no comment what-
soever about how he personally interprets the microbes that he sees through the microscope, and the narrator gives no inkling as to his reaction to the “small animals.” He is preoccupied not with what is revealed to him but with the likely way that the church leaders will respond when they hear about their involvement with the microscope. He knows that Roger Bacon and Roger of Salerno will more than likely make their discovery widely known, Bacon to point to a major advancement in science—he is intent upon finding out how the microscope “works” so that he can explain it fully in his writings—and Roger of Salerno to announce to the medical world a giant step forward in finding cures for diseases through research with the fascinating and marvelous new instrument. “Mother Church,” however, to whom four of the five present have to answer, will take a contrary view and accuse them all of satanic mischief. Stephen’s comments, therefore, are made in order to justify his destruction of this controversial new aid to seeing. The microscope will be interpreted as enabling one to see too much, he argues, and he proceeds to make his tightly reasoned and highly convincing speech about the worldwide consequences of letting it be known what they have in the monastery and what they have seen with it. Speaking of the microscope, he states:

But this birth, my sons, is untimely. It will be but the mother of more death, more torture more division, and greater darkness in this dark age. Therefore I, who know both my world and the Church, take this Choice on my conscience. Go! It is finished.

Immediately upon completing this powerful pronouncement, “he thrust the wooden part of the compasses deep among the beech logs till all was burned,” and with these words, the story ends.82

§ § §

Any interpretation of “The Eye of Allah” should deal with the following questions. Of what significance is it that Stephen has seen the microscope and what it reveals long before any of the others in the monastery? What is the purpose of this detail in the story? Stephen makes it clear that while he was a prisoner of the Saracens in Cairo during one of the Crusades, he was introduced to the microscope and that he has thought much about it during the time since. Why has he kept silent about it? When he was released from captivity, he made no effort to learn more about this important tool of science although he is “a man of science above all.” It is not as if he dismissed the experience from his mind when he came back to England from captivity in Egypt.
When a highly emotional Roger of Salerno pleads with him to think about what he is intent upon doing—destroying the microscope—he replies: “I have thought about it, Salerno! I have thought indeed.” Kipling wishes to make it clear that Stephen’s determination to do what he does is not the consequence of an on-the-spot decision but the result of a long period of pondering at which time he considered all factors involved, all the implications of his involvement and that of his monastery with this wondrous instrument, which he saw in operation in Cairo. The effect of this detail in the story—that this is not the first time Stephen has seen through a microscope—is to stress the fact that he is in a much better position to determine the wisest course of action because he has had a period of time to think about the issue.

He has kept silent about what he witnessed in Egypt and then smashes and burns the microscope when it turns up in his own monastery because, to put it simply, he does not wish to be smashed and burned himself. Through Stephen’s actions, the microscope suddenly becomes the sacrificial object in an ironic twist to Christ’s vicarious sacrifice on the cross. Stephen’s final words in the story, “It is finished,” are exactly the final words of Jesus on the cross (John 19:30).

Stephen burns the microscope so that he and those around him who are arguing for the preservation of the microscope will not have to burn as heretics for practicing witchcraft or “magic” by calling up images of hell. By burning the microscope, he is saving them all from being burned at the stake. It is crucially important that in answer to the question Roger of Salerno asks (“where do we stand” when “Most Holy Mother Church” gets word of their having seen through the strange new instrument what will be interpreted as hell), Stephen answers: “At the stake.” He then turns to the most vociferous objector to the destruction of the microscope, Roger Bacon: “You hear that? Roger Bacon, heard you that?” What Kipling is suggesting is that this is the underlying reason, more basic than all the other reasons he has given, for Stephen’s decision to destroy the microscope. His thinking embodies the essence of pragmatism. All those present in this final scene of “The Eye of Allah” are empiricists, but as it turns out, the most practical of them all is the Abbot. The author could not have paid him a greater compliment. A monastery that has as its abbot a true pragmatist is unquestionably the monastery of a dream—at least for Rudyard Kipling.