SOMETHING
OF
MYSELF

For My
Friends
Known
and
Unknown
CHAPTER I

A Very Young Person

1865–1878

Give me the first six years of a child's life and you can have the rest.¹

Looking back from this my seventy-fifth year, it seems to me that every card in my working life has been dealt me in such a manner that I had but to play it as it came. Therefore, ascribing all good fortune to Allah the Dispenser of Events, I begin:—

My first impression is of daybreak, light and colour and golden and purple fruits at the level of my shoulder. This would be the memory of early morning walks to the Bombay fruit market with my aya² and later with my sister³ in her perambulator, and of our returns with our purchases piled high on the bows of it. Our aya was a Portuguese Roman Catholic who would pray—I beside her—at a wayside Cross. Meeta,⁴ my Hindu bearer, would sometimes go into little Hindu temples where, being below the age of caste, I held his hand and looked at the dimly-seen, friendly Gods.

Our evening walks were by the sea in the shadow of palm-groves which, I think, were called the Mahim Woods. When the wind blew the great nuts would tumble, and we fled—my aya, and my sister in her perambulator—to the safety of the open. I have always felt the menacing darkness of tropical eventides, as I have loved the voices of night-winds through palm or banana leaves, and the song of the tree-frogs.
There were far-going Arab dhows on the pearly waters, and gaily
dressed Parsees wading out to worship the sunset. Of their creed I
knew nothing, nor did I know that near our little house on the
Bombay Esplanade were the Towers of Silence, where their Dead
are exposed to the waiting vultures on the rim of the towers, who
scuffle and spread wings when they see the bearers of the Dead
below. I did not understand my Mother’s distress when she found ‘a
child’s hand’ in our garden, and said I was not to ask questions about
it. I wanted to see that child’s hand. But my ayah told me.

In the afternoon heats before we took our sleep, she or Meeta
would tell us stories and Indian nursery songs all unforgotten, and
we were sent into the dining-room after we had been dressed, with
the caution ‘Speak English now to Papa and Mamma.’ So one spoke
‘English,’ haltingly translated out of the vernacular idiom that one
thought and dreamed in. The Mother sang wonderful songs at a
black piano and would go out to Big Dinners. Once she came back,
very quickly, and told me, still awake, that ‘the big Lord Sahib’ had
been killed and there was to be no Big Dinner. This was Lord Mayo,6
assassinated by a native. Meeta explained afterwards that he had
been ‘hit with a knife.’ Meeta unconsciously saved me from any
night terrors or dread of the dark. Our ayah, with a servant’s curious
mixture of deep affection and shallow device, had told me that a
stuffed leopard’s head on the nursery wall was there to see that I
went to sleep. But Meeta spoke of it scornfully as ‘the head of an
animal,’ and I took it off my mind as a fetish, good or bad, for it was
only some unspecified ‘animal.’

Far across green spaces round the house was a marvellous place
filled with smells of paints and oils, and lumps of clay with which I
played. That was the atelier of my Father’s School of Art,7 and a Mr.
‘Terry Sahib’ his assistant, to whom my small sister was devoted,
was our great friend. Once, on the way there alone, I passed the edge
of a huge ravine a foot deep, where a winged monster as big as myself
attacked me, and I fled and wept. My Father drew for me a picture
of the tragedy with a rhyme beneath:—

There was a small boy in Bombay
Who once from a hen ran away.
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When they said: 'You're a baby,'
He replied: 'Well, I may be:
But I don't like these hens of Bombay.'

This consoled me. I have thought well of hens ever since.

Then those days of strong light and darkness passed, and there was a time in a ship\(^9\) with an immense semi-circle blocking all vision on each side of her. (She must have been the old paddlewheel P. & O. Ripe.)\(^{10}\) There was a train across a desert (the Suez Canal was not yet opened) and a halt in it, and a small girl wrapped in a shawl on the seat opposite me, whose face stands out still.\(^{11}\) There was next a dark land, and a darker room full of cold, in one wall of which a white woman made naked fire, and I cried aloud with dread, for I had never before seen a grate.

Then came a new small house\(^{12}\) smelling of aridity and emptiness, and a parting in the dawn with Father and Mother, who said that I must learn quickly to read and write so that they might send me letters and books.

I lived in that house for close on six years.\(^{13}\) It belonged to a woman who took in children whose parents were in India. She was married to an old Navy Captain, who had been a midshipman at Navarino,\(^{14}\) and had afterwards been entangled in a harpoon-line while whale-fishing, and dragged down till he miraculously freed himself. But the line had scarred his ankle for life—a dry, black scar, which I used to look at with horrified interest.

The house itself stood in the extreme suburbs of Southsea, next to a Portsmouth unchanged in most particulars since Trafalgar—the Portsmouth of Sir Walter Besant's By Celia's Arbour.\(^{15}\) The timber for a Navy that was only experimenting with iron-clads such as the Inflexible lay in great booms in the harbour. The little training-brigs kept their walks opposite Southsea Castle, and Portsmouth Hard\(^{16}\) was as it had always been. Outside these things lay the desolation of Hayling Island, Lumps Fort, and the isolated hamlet of Milton. I would go for long walks with the Captain, and once he took me to see a ship called the Alert (or Discovery)\(^{17}\) returned from Arctic explorations, her decks filled with old sledges and lumber, and her spare rudder being cut up for souvenirs. A sailor gave me a piece, but I lost
it. Then the old Captain died,\textsuperscript{19} and I was sorry, for he was the only person in that house as far as I can remember who ever threw me a kind word.

It was an establishment run with the full vigour of the Evangelical as revealed to the Woman. I had never heard of Hell, so I was introduced to it in all its terrors—I and whatever luckless little slavey might be in the house, whom severe rationing had led to steal food. Once I saw the Woman beat such a girl who picked up the kitchen poker and threatened retaliation. Myself I was regularly beaten. The Woman had an only son\textsuperscript{20} of twelve or thirteen as religious as she. I was a real joy to him, for when his mother had finished with me for the day he (we slept in the same room) took me on and roasted the other side.

If you cross-examine a child of seven or eight on his day’s doings (specially when he wants to go to sleep) he will contradict himself very satisfactorily. If each contradiction be set down as a lie and retailed at breakfast, life is not easy. I have known a certain amount of bullying, but this was calculated torture—religious as well as scientific. Yet it made me give attention to the lies I soon found it necessary to tell: and this, I presume, is the foundation of literary effort.

But my ignorance was my salvation. I was made to read without explanation, under the usual fear of punishment. And on a day that I remember it came to me that ‘reading’ was not ‘the Cat lay on the Mat,’ but a means to everything that would make me happy. So I read all that came within my reach. As soon as my pleasure in this was known, deprivation from reading was added to my punishments. I then read by stealth and the more earnestly.

There were not many books in that house, but Father and Mother as soon as they heard I could read sent me priceless volumes. One I have still, a bound copy of \textit{Aunt Judy’s Magazine} of the early ’seventies, in which appeared Mrs. Ewing’s \textit{Six to Sixteen}.\textsuperscript{21} I owe more in circuitious ways to that tale than I can tell. I knew it, as I know it still, almost by heart. Here was a history of real people and real things. It was better than Knatchbull-Hugesson’s \textit{Tales at Tea-time},\textsuperscript{22} better even than \textit{The Old Shikari} with its steel engravings of charging pigs and angry tigers. On another plane was an old
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magazine with Wordsworth’s ‘I climbed the dark brow of the mighty Helvellyn.’ I knew nothing of its meaning but the words moved and pleased. So did other extracts from the poems of ‘A. Tennyson.’

A visitor, too, gave me a little purple book of severely moral tendency called The Hope of the Katzikopfs—about a bad boy made virtuous, but it contained verses that began, ‘Farewell Rewards and Fairies,’ and ended with an injunction ‘To pray for the “noddle” of William Churne of Staffordshire.’ This bore fruit afterwards.

And somehow or other I came across a tale about a lion-hunter in South Africa who fell among lions who were all Freemasons, and with them entered into a confederacy against some wicked baboons. I think that, too, lay dormant until the Jungle Books began to be born.

There comes to my mind here a memory of two books of verse about child-life which I have tried in vain to identify. One—blue and fat—described ‘nine white wolves’ coming ‘over the world’ and stirred me to the deeps; and also certain savages who ‘thought the name of England was something that could not burn.’

The other book—brown and fat—was full of lovely tales in strange metres. A girl was turned into a water-rat ‘as a matter of course’; an Urchin cured an old man of gout by means of a cool cabbage-leaf, and somehow ‘forty wicked Goblins’ were mixed up in the plot; and a ‘Darling’ got out on the house-leads with a broom and tried to sweep stars off the skies. It must have been an unusual book for that age, but I have never been able to recover it, any more than I have a song that a nursemaid sang at low-tide in the face of the sunset on Littlehampton Sands when I was less than six. But the impression of wonder, excitement and terror and the red bars of failing light is as clear as ever.

Among the servants in the House of Desolation was one from Cumnor, which name I associated with sorrow and darkness and a raven that ‘flapped its wings.’ Years later I identified the lines: ‘And thrice the Raven flapped her wing. Around the towers of Cumnor Hall.’ But how and where I first heard the lines that cast the shadow is beyond me—unless it be that the brain holds everything
KiPLING: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

that passes within reach of the senses, and it is only ourselves who do not know this.

When my Father sent me a Robinson Crusoe with steel engravings I set up in business alone as a trader with savages (the wreck parts of the tale never much interested me), in a mildewy basement room where I stood my solitary confinements. My apparatus was a coconut shell strung on a red cord, a tin trunk, and a piece of packing-case which kept off any other world. Thus fenced about, everything inside the fence was quite real, but mixed with the smell of damp cupboards. If the bit of board fell, I had to begin the magic all over again. I have learned since from children who play much alone that this rule of ‘beginning again in a pretend game’ is not uncommon. The magic, you see, lies in the ring or fence that you take refuge in.

Once I remember being taken to a town called Oxford and a street called Holywell, where I was shown an Ancient of Days who, I was told, was the Provost of Oriel; wherefore I never understood, but conceived him to be some sort of idol. And twice or thrice we went, all of us, to pay a day-long visit to an old gentleman in a house in the country near Havant. Here everything was wonderful and unlike my world, and he had an old lady sister who was kind, and I played in hot, sweet-smelling meadows and ate all sorts of things.

After such a visit I was once put through the third degree by the Woman and her son, who asked me if I had told the old gentleman that I was much fonder of him than was the Woman’s son. It must have been the tail-end of some sordid intrigue or other—the old gentleman being of kin to that unhappy pair—but it was beyond my comprehension. My sole concern had been a friendly pony in the paddock. My dazed attempts to clear myself were not accepted and, once again, the pleasure that I was seen to have taken was balanced by punishments and humiliation—above all humiliation. That alternation was quite regular. I can but admire the infernal laborious ingenuity of it all. Exempli gratia. Coming out of church once I smiled. The Devil-Boy demanded why. I said I didn’t know, which was child’s truth. He replied that I must know. People didn’t laugh for nothing. Heaven knows what explanation I put forward; but it was duly reported to the Woman as a ‘lie.’ Result, afternoon upstairs
with the Collect to learn. I learned most of the Collects that way and a great deal of the Bible. The son after three or four years went into a Bank and was generally too tired on his return to torture me, unless things had gone wrong with him. I learned to know what was coming from his step into the house.

But, for a month each year I possessed a paradise which I verily believe saved me. Each December I stayed with my Aunt Georgy, my mother's sister, wife of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, at The Grange, North End Road. At first I must have been escorted there, but later I went alone, and arriving at the house would reach up to the open-work iron bell-pull on the wonderful gate that let me into all felicity. When I had a house of my own, and The Grange was emptied of meaning, I begged for and was given that bell-pull for my entrance, in the hope that other children might also feel happy when they rang it.

At The Grange I had love and affection as much as the greediest, and I was not very greedy, could desire. There were most wonderful smells of paints and turpentine whiffing down from the big studio on the first floor where my Uncle worked; there was the society of my two cousins, and a sloping mulberry tree which we used to climb for our plots and conferences. There was a rocking-horse in the nursery and a table that, tilted up on two chairs, made a toboggan-slide of the best. There were pictures finished or half finished of lovely colours; and in the rooms chairs and cupboards such as the world had not yet seen, for William Morris (our Deputy 'Uncle Topsy') was just beginning to fabricate these things. There was an incessant come and go of young people and grown-ups all willing to play with us—except an elderly person called 'Browning,' who took no proper interest in the skirmishes which happened to be raging on his entry. Best of all, immeasurably, was the beloved Aunt herself reading us The Pirate or The Arabian Nights of evenings, when one lay out on the big sofas sucking toffee, and calling our cousins 'Ho, Son,' or 'Daughter of my Uncle' or 'O True Believer.'

Often the Uncle, who had a 'golden voice,' would assist in our evening play, though mostly he worked at black and white in the middle of our riots. He was never idle. We made a draped chair in the hall serve for the seat of 'Norna of the Fitful Head' and
addressed her questions till the Uncle got inside the rugs and gave us answers which thrilled us with delightful shivers, in a voice deeper than all the boots in the world. And once he descended in broad daylight with a tube of ‘Mummy Brown’ in his hand, saying that he had discovered it was made of dead Pharaohs and we must bury it accordingly. So we all went out and helped—according to the rites of Mizraim and Memphis, I hope—and—to this day I could drive a spade within a foot of where that tube lies.

At bedtime one hastened along the passages, where unfinished cartoons lay against the walls. The Uncle often painted in their eyes first, leaving the rest in charcoal—a most effective presentation. Hence our speed to our own top-landing, where we could hang over the stairs and listen to the loveliest sound in the world—deep-voiced men laughing together over dinner.

It was a jumble of delights and emotions culminating in being allowed to blow the big organ in the studio for the beloved Aunt, while the Uncle worked, or ‘Uncle Topsy’ came in full of some business of picture-frames or stained glass or general denunciations. Then it was hard to keep the little lead weight on its string below the chalk mark, and if the organ ran out in squeals the beloved Aunt would be sorry. Never, never angry!

As a rule Morris took no notice of anything outside what was in his mind at the moment. But I remember one amazing exception. My cousin Margaret and I, then about eight, were in the nursery eating pork-dripping on brown bread, which is a dish for the Gods, when we heard ‘Uncle Topsy’ in the hall calling, as he usually did, for ‘Ned’ or ‘Georgie.’ The matter was outside our world. So we were the more impressed when, not finding the grown-ups, he came in and said he would tell us a story. We settled ourselves under the table which we used for a toboggan-slide and he, gravely as ever, climbed on to our big rocking-horse. There, slowly surging back and forth while the poor beast creaked, he told us a tale full of fascinating horrors, about a man who was condemned to dream bad dreams. One of them took the shape of a cow’s tail waving from a heap of dried fish. He went away as abruptly as he had come. Long afterwards, when I was old enough to know a maker’s pains, it dawned on me that we must have heard the Saga of Burnt Njal,43 which was
then interesting him. In default of grown-ups, and pressed by need to pass the story between his teeth and clarify it, he had used us.

But on a certain day—one tried to fend off the thought of it—the delicious dream would end, and one would return to the House of Desolation, and for the next two or three mornings there cry on waking up. Hence more punishments and cross-examinations.

Often and often afterwards, the beloved Aunt would ask me why I had never told any one how I was being treated. Children tell little more than animals, for what comes to them they accept as eternally established. Also, badly-treated children have a clear notion of what they are likely to get if they betray the secrets of a prison-house before they are clear of it.

In justice to the Woman I can say that I was adequately fed. (I remember a gift to her of some red ‘fruit’ called ‘tomatoes’ which, after long consideration, she boiled with sugar; and they were very beastly. The tinned meat of those days was Australian beef with a crumbly fat, and string-boiled mutton, hard to get down.) Nor was my life an unsuitable preparation for my future, in that it demanded constant wariness, the habit of observation, and attendance on moods and tempers; the noting of discrepancies between speech and action; a certain reserve of demeanour; and automatic suspicion of sudden favours. Brother Lippo Lippi, in his own harder case, as a boy discovered:—

Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
He learns the look of things and none the less
For admonition.**

So it was with me.

My troubles settled themselves in a few years. My eyes went wrong, and I could not well see to read. For which reason I read the more and in bad lights. My work at the terrible little day-school** where I had been sent suffered in consequence, and my monthly reports showed it. The loss of ‘reading-time’ was the worst of my ‘home’ punishments for bad school-work. One report was so bad that I threw it away and said that I had never received it. But this is a hard world for the amateur liar. My web of deceit was swiftly exposed—the Son spared time after banking-hours to help in the...