

1888

WRESSLEY OF THE FOREIGN OFFICE

Rudyard Kipling

Kipling, Rudyard (1865-1936) - An English novelist, short-story writer, and poet who spent most of his youth in India, and is best known for his children's classics. In 1907, Kipling was the first English writer ever to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Wressley of the Foreign Office (1888) - From "Plain Tales from the Hills," a collection of stories of life in India. A man falls for a girl who claims to be interested in his studies but, in the end, leaves him a broken man.

WRESLEY OF THE FOREIGN OFFICE

I closed and drew for my Love's sake, That now is false to me, And
I slew the Riever of Tarrant Moss, And set Dumeny free.

And ever they give me praise and gold, And ever I moan my loss;
For I struck the blow for my false Love's sake, And not for the men
of the Moss!

Tarrant Moss.

ONE of the many curses of our life in India is the want of atmosphere in the painter's sense. There are no half-tints worth noticing. Men stand out all crude and raw, with nothing to tone them down, and nothing to scale them against. They do their work, and grow to think that there is nothing but their work, and nothing like their work, and that they are the real pivots on which the Administration turns. Here is an instance of this feeling. A half-caste clerk was ruling forms in a Pay Office. He said to me, 'Do you know what would happen if I added or took away one single line on this sheet?' Then, with the air of a conspirator, 'It would disorganise the whole of the Treasury payments throughout the whole of the Presidency Circle! Think of that!' If men had not this delusion as to the ultra-importance of their own particular employments, I suppose that they would sit down and kill themselves. But their weakness is wearisome, particularly when the listener knows that he himself commits exactly the same sin.

Even the Secretariat believes that it does good when it asks an over-driven Executive Officer to take a census of wheat weevils through a district of five thousand square miles.

There was a man once in the Foreign Office- a man who had grown middleaged in the Department, and was commonly said, by irreverent juniors, to be able to repeat Atchison's "Treaties and Sunnuds" backwards in his sleep. What he did with his stored knowledge only the Secretary knew; and he, naturally, would not publish the news abroad. This man's name was Wressley, and it was the Shibboleth, in those days, to say- 'Wressley knows more about the Central Indian States than any living man.' If you did not say this, you were considered one of mean understanding.

Nowadays, the man who says that he knows the ravel of the inter-tribal complications across the Border is of more use; but, in Wressley's time, much attention was paid to the Central Indian States. They were called 'foci' and 'factors,' and all manner of imposing names.

And here the curse of Anglo-Indian life fell heavily. When Wressley lifted up his voice, and spoke about such-and-such a succession to such-and-such a throne, the Foreign Office were silent, and Heads of Departments repeated the last two or three words of Wressley's sentences, and tacked 'yes, yes,' on to them, and knew that they were assisting the Empire to grapple with serious political contingencies. In most big undertakings, one or two men do the work while the rest sit near and talk till the ripe decorations begin to fall.

Wressley was the working member of the Foreign Office firm, and, to keep him up to his duties when he showed signs of flagging, he was made much of by his superiors and told what a fine fellow he was. He did not require coaxing, because he was of tough build, but what he received confirmed him in the belief that there was no one quite so absolutely and imperatively necessary to the stability of India as Wressley of the Foreign Office. There might be other good men, but the known, honoured, and trusted man among men was Wressley of the Foreign Office. We had a Viceroy in those days who knew exactly when to 'gentle' a fractious big man, and to hearten-up a collar-galled little one, and so keep all his team level. He conveyed to Wressley the impression which I have just set down; and even tough men are apt to be disorganised by a Viceroy's praise. There was a case once- but that is another story.

All men knew Wressley's name and office- it was in Thacker and Spink's Directory- but who he was personally, or what he did, or what his special merits were, not fifty men knew or cared. His work filled all his time, and he found no leisure to cultivate acquaintances beyond those of dead Rajput chiefs with Ahir blots in their scutcheons. Wressley would have made a very good Clerk in the Herald's College had he not been a Bengal Civilian. Upon a day, between office and office, great trouble came to Wressley- overwhelmed him, knocked him down, and left him gasping as though he had been a little schoolboy. Without reason, against prudence, and at a moment's notice, he fell in love with a frivolous, golden-haired girl who used to tear about Simla Mall on a high, rough Waler, with a blue velvet jockey-cap crammed over her eyes.

Her name was Venner- Tillie Venner- and she was delightful. She took Wressley's heart at a hand-gallop, and Wressley found that it was not good for man to live alone; even with half the Foreign Office Records in his presses.

Then Simla laughed, for Wressley in love was slightly ridiculous. He did his best to interest the girl in himself- that is to say, his work- and she, after the manner of women, did her best to appear

interested in what, behind his back, she called 'Mr. W'essley's Wajahs'; for she lisped very prettily. She did not understand one little thing about them, but she acted as if she did. Men have married on that sort of error before now.

Providence, however, had care of Wressley. He was immensely struck with Miss Venner's intelligence. He would have been more impressed had he heard her private and confidential accounts of his calls. He held peculiar notions as to the wooing of girls. He said that the best work of a man's career should be laid reverently at their feet. Ruskin writes something like this somewhere, I think; but in ordinary life a few kisses are better and save time.

About a month after he had lost his heart to Miss Venner, and had been doing his work vilely in consequence, the first idea of his "Native Rule in Central India" struck Wressley and filled him with joy. It was, as he sketched it, a great thing the work of his life- a really comprehensive survey of a most fascinating subject to be written with all the special and laboriously acquired knowledge of Wressley of the Foreign Office- a gift fit for an Empress.

He told Miss Venner that he was going to take leave, and hoped, on his return, to bring her a present worthy of her acceptance. Would she wait? Certainly she would. Wressley drew seventeen hundred rupees a month. She would wait a year for that. Her Mamma would help her to wait.

So Wressley took one year's leave and all the available documents, about a truck-load, that he could lay hands on, and went down to Central India with his notion hot in his head. He began his book in the land he was writing of. Too much official correspondence had made him a frigid work man, and he must have guessed that he needed the white light of local colour on his palette. This is a dangerous paint for amateurs to play with.

Heavens, how that man worked! He caught his Rajahs, analysed his Rajahs, and traced them up into the mists of Time and beyond, with their queens and their concubines. He dated and cross-dated, pedigreed and triple-pedigreed, compared, noted, connoted, wove, strung, sorted, selected, inferred, calendared and counter-calendared for ten hours a day. And, because this sudden and new light of Love was upon him, he turned those dry bones of history and dirty records of misdeeds into things to weep or to laugh over as he pleased. His heart and soul were at the end of his pen, and they got into the ink. He was dowered with sympathy, insight, humour, and style for two hundred and thirty days and nights; and his book was a Book. He had his vast special knowledge with

him, so to speak; but the spirit, the woven-in human Touch, the poetry and the power of the output, were beyond all special knowledge. But I doubt whether he knew the gift that was in him then, and thus he may have lost some happiness. He was toiling for Tillie Venner, not for himself. Men often do their best work blind, for some one else's sake.

Also, though this has nothing to do with the story, in India, where every one knows every one else, you can watch men being driven, by the women who govern them, out of the rank-and-file and sent to take up points alone. A good man, once started, goes forward; but an average man, so soon as the woman loses interest in his success as a tribute to her power, comes back to the battalion and is no more heard of.

Wressley bore the first copy of his book to Simla, and, blushing and stammering, presented it to Miss Venner. She read a little of it. I give her review verbatim 'Oh, your book? It's all about those howwid Wajahs. I didn't understand it.' Wressley of the Foreign Office was broken, smashed, - I am not exaggerating, by this one frivolous little girl. All that he could say feebly was - 'But- but it's my magnum opus! The work of my life.' Miss Venner did not know what magnum opus meant; but she knew that Captain Kerrington had won three races at the last Gymkhana. Wressley didn't press her to wait for him any longer. He had sense enough for that.

Then came the reaction after the year's strain, and Wressley went back to the Foreign Office and his 'Wajahs,' a compiling, gazetteering, report-writing hack who would have been dear at three hundred rupees a month. He abided by Miss Venner's review. Which proves that the inspiration in the book was purely temporary and unconnected with himself. Nevertheless, he had no right to sink, in a hilltarn, five packing-cases, brought up at enormous expense from Bombay, of the best book of Indian history every written.

When he sold off before retiring, some years later, I was turning over his shelves, and came across the only existing copy of "Native Rule in Central India" the copy that Miss Venner could not understand. I read it, sitting on his muletrunks, as long as the light lasted, and offered him his own price for it. He looked over my shoulder for a few pages and said to himself drearily 'Now, how in the world did I come to write such damned good stuff as that?' Then to me 'Take it and keep it. Write one of your penny-farthing yarns about its birth.

Perhaps- perhaps- the whole business may have been ordained to that end.'

Which, knowing what Wressley of the Foreign Office was once, struck me as about the bitterest thing that I had ever heard a man say of his own work.

THE END