

Travel Classics Enhanced



Rudyard Kipling

Across a Continent

The Editors of New Word City



ACROSS A CONTINENT

**Rudyard Kipling
And the Editors of New Word City**



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RUDYARD KIPLING, THE LIFE

RUDYARD KIPLING, THE QUOTATIONS

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Editor's Note: From 1892 to 1913, Rudyard Kipling traveled the globe, reporting on his adventures for a number of British newspapers. This piece, which was originally published in London's *Morning Post*, recounts his journey from New York to St. Paul, Minnesota, and across Canada.

It is not easy to escape from a big city. An entire continent was waiting to be traversed, and, for that reason, we lingered in New York till the city felt so homelike that it seemed wrong to leave it. And further, the more one studied it, the more grotesquely bad it grew – bad in its paving, bad in its streets, bad in its street police, and but for the kindness of the tides would be worse than bad in its sanitary arrangements. No one as yet has approached the management of New York in a proper spirit; that is to say, regarding it as the shiftless outcome of squalid barbarism and reckless extravagance. No one is likely to do so, because reflections on the long, narrow pig trough are construed as malevolent attacks against the spirit and majesty of the great American people, and lead to angry comparisons. Yet, if all the streets of London were permanently up and all of New York permanently down, this would not prevent the New York streets taken in a lump from being first cousins to a **Zanzibar** foreshore, or kin to the approaches of a **Zulu kraal**. Gullies, holes, ruts, cobblestones

awry, curbstones rising from two to six inches above the level of the slatternly pavement; tramlines from two to three inches above street level; building materials scattered half across the street; lime, boards, cut stone, and ash barrels generally and generously everywhere; wheeled traffic taking its chances, **dray** versus **brougham**, at crossroads; sway-backed poles whittled and unpainted; drunken lampposts with twisted irons; and, lastly, a generous scatter of filth and more mixed stinks than the winter wind can carry away, are matters which can be considered quite apart from the “Spirit of Democracy” or “the future of this great and growing country.”

In any other land, they would be held to represent slovenliness, sordidness, and want of capacity. Here it is explained, not once but many times, that they show the speed at which the city has grown and the enviable indifference of her citizens to matters of detail. One of these days, you are told, everything will be taken in hand and put straight. The un-virtuous rulers of the city will be swept away by a cyclone, or a tornado, or something big and booming, of popular indignation; everybody will unanimously elect the right men, who will justly earn the enormous salaries that are at present being paid to inadequate aliens for road sweepings, and all will be well. At the same time the lawlessness ingrained by governors among the governed during the last thirty, forty, or it may be fifty years; the brutal levity of the public conscience in regard to public duty; the toughening and suppling of public morals, and the reckless disregard for human life, bred by impotent laws and fostered by familiarity with needless accidents and criminal neglect, will miraculously disappear. If the laws of cause and effect that control even the freest people in the world say otherwise, so much the worse for the laws. America makes her own. Behind her stands the ghost of the most bloody **war** of the century caused in a peaceful land by long temporizing with lawlessness, by letting things slide, by shiftlessness and blind disregard for all save the

material need of the hour, till the hour long conceived and let alone stood up full-armed, and men said, "Here is an unforeseen crisis," and killed each other in the name of God for four years.

In a heathen land the three things that are supposed to be the pillars of moderately decent government are regard for human life, justice, criminal and civil, as far as it lies in man to do justice, and good roads. In this Christian city they think lightly of the first - their own papers, their own speech, and their own actions prove it; buy and sell the second at a price openly and without shame; and are, apparently, content to do without the third. One would almost expect racial sense of humor would stay them from expecting only praise - slab, lavish, and slavish - from the stranger within their gates. But they do not. If he holds his peace, they forge tributes to their own excellence which they put into his mouth, thereby treating their own land which they profess to honor as a quack treats his pills. If he speaks - but you shall see for yourselves what happens then. And they cannot see that by untruth and invective it is themselves alone that they injure.

The blame of their city evils is not altogether with the gentlemen, chiefly of foreign extraction, who control the city. These find a people made to their hand - a lawless breed ready to wink at one evasion of the law if they themselves may profit by another, and in their rare leisure hours content to smile over the details of a clever fraud. Then, says the cultured American, "Give us time. Give us time, and we shall arrive." The otherwise American, who is aggressive, straightway proceeds to thrust a piece of half-hanged municipal botch-work under the nose of the alien as a sample of perfected effort.