



KIPLING AND I

Sometimes I pass Debevoise Place at the corner of Willoughby Street. . . . I
 look at the old wooden house, gray and ancient, the house where I used to live
 some forty years ago. . . . 1

My room was on the second floor at the corner. On hot summer nights I
 would sit at the window reading by the electric light from the street lamp which
 was almost at a level with the window sill. 2

It was nice to come home late during the winter, look for some scrap of old
 newspaper, some bits of wood and a few chunks of coal and start a sparkling fire
 in the chunky fourlegged coal stove. I would be rewarded with an intimate
 warmth as little by little the pigmy stove became alive, puffing out its sides, hot
 and red, like the crimson cheeks of a Santa Claus. 3

My few books were in a soap box nailed to the wall. But my most prized
 possession in those days was a poem I had bought in a five and ten cent store
 on Fulton Street. (I wonder what has become of these poems, maxims and
 sayings of wise men that they used to sell at the five and ten cent stores?) The
 poem was printed on gold paper and mounted on a gilded frame ready to be
 hung in a conspicuous place in the house. I bought one of those fancy silken
 picture cords finishing in a rosette to match the color of the frame. 4

I was seventeen. This poem to me then seemed to summarize the wisdom
 of all the sages that ever lived in one poetical nutshell. It was what I was looking
 for, something to guide myself by, a way of life, a compendium of the wise, the
 true and the beautiful. All I had to do was to live according to the counsel of
 the poem and follow its instructions and I would be a perfect man—the useful,
 the good, the true human being. I was very happy that day, forty years ago. 5

The poem had to have the most prominent place in the room. Where could
 I hang it? I decided that the best place for the poem was on the wall right by
 the entrance to the room. No one coming in and out would miss it. Perhaps
 someone would be interested enough to read it and drink the profound waters
 of its message. . . . 6

Every morning as I prepared to leave, I stood in front of the poem and read
 it over and over again, sometimes half a dozen times. I let the sonorous music
 of the verse carry me away. I brought with me a handwritten copy as I stepped
 out every morning looking for work, repeating verses and stanzas from memory
 until the whole poem came to be part of me. Other days my lips kept repeating
 a single verse of the poem at intervals throughout the day. 7

In the subways I loved to compete with the shrill noises of the many wheels
 below by chanting the lines of the poem. People stared at me moving my lips
 as though I were in a trance. I looked back with pity. They were not so fortunate
 as I who had as a guide to direct my life a great poem to make me wise, useful
 and happy. 8

9 And I chanted:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . .

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting
Or being hated don't give way to hating . . .

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on a turn of pitch and toss . . .
And lose and start again at your beginnings . . .

10 “If,” by Kipling, was the poem. At seventeen, my evening prayer and my
first morning thought. I repeated it every day with the resolution to live up to
the very last line of that poem.

11 I would visit the government employment office on Jay Street. The con-
versations among the Puerto Ricans on the large wooden benches in the em-
ployment office were always on the same subject. How to find a decent place
to live. How they would not rent to Negroes or Puerto Ricans. How Negroes
and Puerto Ricans were given the pink slips first at work.

12 From the employment office I would call door to door at the piers, factories
and storage houses in the streets under the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges.
“Sorry, nothing today.” It seemed to me that “today” was a continuation and
combination of all the yesterdays, todays and tomorrows.

13 From the factories I would go to the restaurants looking for a job as a porter
or dishwasher. At least I would eat and be warm in a kitchen.

14 “Sorry” . . . “Sorry” . . .

15 Sometimes I was hired at ten dollars a week, ten hours a day including
Sundays and holidays. One day off during the week. My work was that of three
men: dishwasher, porter, busboy. And to clear the sidewalk of snow and slush
“when you have nothing else to do.” I was to be appropriately humble and
grateful not only to the owner but to everybody else in the place.

16 If I rebelled at insults or at a pointed innuendo or just the inhuman amount
of work, I was unceremoniously thrown out and told to come “next week for
your pay.” “Next week” meant weeks of calling for the paltry dollars owed me.
The owners relished this “next week.”

17 I clung to my poem as to a faith. Like a potent amulet, my precious poem
was clenched in the fist of my right hand inside my second-hand overcoat. Again
and again I declaimed aloud a few precious lines when discouragement and
disillusionment threatened to overwhelm me.

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after you are gone . . .

The weeks of unemployment and hard knocks turned into months. I continued to find two or three days of work here and there. And I continued to be thrown out when I rebelled at the ill treatment, overwork and insults. I kept pounding the streets looking for a place where they would treat me half decently, where my devotion to work and faith in Kipling's poem would be appreciated. I remember the worn out shoes I bought in a second-hand store on Myrtle Avenue at the corner of Adams Street. The round holes in the soles that I tried to cover with pieces of carton were no match for the frigid knives of the unrelenting snow. 18

One night I returned late after a long day of working for work. I was hungry. My room was dark and cold. I wanted to warm my numb body. I lit a match and began looking for some scraps of wood and a piece of paper to start a fire. I searched all over the floor. No wood, no paper. As I stood up, the glimmering flicker of the dying match was reflected in the glass surface of the framed poem. I unhooked the poem from the wall. I reflected for a minute, a minute that felt like an eternity. I took the frame apart, placing the square glass upon the small table. I tore the gold paper on which the poem was printed, threw its pieces inside the stove and placing the small bits of wood from the frame on top of the paper I lit it, adding soft and hard coal as the fire began to gain strength and brightness. 19

I watched how the lines of the poem withered into ashes inside the small stove. ❖ 20

RESPONDING

1. Read the entire poem "If—," which appears below. In a journal entry, discuss how realistic you find its premise. Do you believe what the poem promises? Give examples to support your opinion.

If—

If you can keep your head when all about you
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
 If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
 But make allowance for their doubting too:
 If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
 Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
 Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
 And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

5

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
 If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,

10

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
 And treat those two impostors just the same:
 If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
 Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
 15 Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
 And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
 And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
 And lose, and start again at your beginnings
 20 And never breathe a word about your loss:
 If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you
 Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

25 If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
 Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
 If all men count with you, but none too much:
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 30 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
 And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

- Colón has many problems earning a living in New York City. Working individually or in a group, list Colón's difficulties living and working in New York. Use evidence from the reading to discuss the reasons for his problems. Share your conclusions with the class.
- After reading Colón's work, one could argue that he must confront a system where material things are more important than human suffering. Write an essay agreeing or disagreeing with this view of American society. You may consider his experience and the historical period he wrote about or deal with the issue in relation to contemporary society.
- Why does Colón burn the poem at the end of the selection? Write an essay explaining why a reader might claim that it is a symbolic as well as an actual act.