CRAIG BROWN

One on One

FOURTH ESTATE · *London*

Fourth Estate
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

This Fourth Estate paperback edition published 2012

First published in Great Britain by Fourth Estate in 2011

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-00-736064-2

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Tossed upon ocean waters,
Two wooden logs meet;
Soon a wave will part them,
And never again will they touch.
Just so are we; our meetings
Are momentary, my child.
Another force directs us,
So blame no fault of man.
Ga Di Madgulkar

We have as many personalities
as there are people who know us.
William James

The earth keeps turning round and gets nowhere.
The moment is the only thing that counts.
Jean Cocteau

When Arthur Miller shook my hand I could only think
that this was the hand that had once cupped
the breasts of Marilyn Monroe.
Barry Humphries

ADOLF HITLER

IS KNOCKED DOWN BY

JOHN SCOTT-ELLIS

Briennerstrasse, Munich
August 22nd 1931

Earlier this year, the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – the second largest political party in Germany – moved into new offices at Briennerstrasse 45, near Königsplatz. As he approaches his forty-third birthday, its leader, Adolf Hitler, is enjoying success as a best-selling author: *Mein Kampf* has already sold 50,000 copies. He now has all the trappings of wealth and power: chauffeur, aides, bodyguards, a nine-room apartment at no. 16 Prinzregentenplatz.* His stature grows with each passing day. When strangers spot him in the street or in a café, they often accost him for an autograph.

His new-found sense of self-confidence has made him less sheepish around women. A pretty nineteen-year-old shop assistant named Eva Braun has caught his eye; she works in the shop owned by his personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann. He has even begun dating her. Walking along Ludwigstrasse on this bright, sunny day in Munich, what can possibly go wrong?

A few hundred yards away, young John Scott-Ellis is taking his new car for a spin. He failed to distinguish himself as a pupil at Eton College. 'I had advantages in that I wasn't stupid and was quite good at most games,' he remembers, 'yet I squandered all this because of an ingrained laziness or lack of will … I was a mess … I cheated and felt no remorse and when threatened with the sack – "You have come to the end of your tether," is what Dr Alington once greeted me with – I always managed to put on a tearful act and wriggle out.'

* 'The flat was all in brown and white, really rather ugly and quite plain,' wrote Deborah Mitford in her diary on June 7th 1937, after going with her sister Unity and their mother for tea with Herr Hitler.

He has emerged with few achievements to his name. A letter from his father to his mother, written in John's second year at Eton, reads:

Dear Margot,

I enclose John's reports. As you will see they are uniformly deplorable from beginning to end … I'm afraid he seems to have all his father's failings and none of his very few virtues.

Of course we may have overrated him and he is really only a rather stupid and untidy boy but it may be he is upset by the beginning of the age of puberty. But I must say the lack of ambition and general wooliness of character is profoundly disappointing.

Try and shake the little brute up.

Yours

T.

After leaving Eton last year, John went to stay on one of his family's farms in Kenya (they own many farms there, as well as a hundred acres of central London between Oxford Street and the Marylebone Road, 8,000-odd acres in Ayrshire, the island of Shona and a fair bit of North America too).

It was then decided that he should spend some time in Germany in order to learn a language. In 1931, aged eighteen, he has come to Munich to stay with a family called Pappenheim. He has been in the city for barely a week before he decides to buy himself a small car. He plumps for a red Fiat, which his friends ('very rudely') refer to as 'the Commercial Traveller'. On his first day behind the wheel, he invites Haupt. Pappenheim, a genial sixty-year-old, to join him. Thus, he hopes to find his way around Munich, and to avoid any traffic misdemeanours.

They set off. John drives safely up the Luitpoldstrasse, past the Siegestor. The Fiat is handling well. The test run is a breeze. On this bright, sunny day in Munich, what can possibly go wrong?

While Adolf Hitler is striding along the pavement, John is driving his Fiat up Ludwigstrasse. He takes a right turn into Briennerstrasse. Crossing the road, Hitler fails to look left. There is a sudden crunch.

'Although I was going very slowly, a man walked off the pavement, more or less straight into my car,' recalls John. Many drivers, before and since, have used those very same words, often to magistrates.

The pedestrian – in his early forties, with a small square moustache – is down on one knee. John is alarmed, but the man heaves himself to his feet. 'He was soon up and I knew that he wasn't hurt. I opened the window and naturally, as I hadn't a word of German, let Haupt Pappenheim do the talking. I was more anxious about whether a policeman, who was directing the traffic, had seen the incident.'

All is well. The policeman has not noticed, or if he has, he is unconcerned. The man with the little moustache brushes himself down, and shakes hands with John and Haupt. Pappenheim, who both wish him well.

'I don't suppose you know who that was?' says Haupt. Pappenheim as they drive away.

'Of course I don't, who is he?'

'Well, he is a politician with a party and he talks a lot. His name is Adolf Hitler.'

Three years later, in 1934, Adolf Hitler is sitting in a box at the small rococo Residenztheater* waiting for the opera to begin. By now he is the German Chancellor, the talk of the world. In the adjoining box is the twenty-one-year-old John Scott-Ellis, celebrating the first night of his honeymoon by taking his young German bride to the opera. John looks to his left. Isn't that the very same fellow he knocked down three years ago?

The young man leans over. He seems to want to say something. Hitler's bodyguards are taken aback. Who is he, and what the hell does he want?

John Scott-Ellis introduces himself. He seizes the moment and asks the Führer if he remembers being knocked over in the street three years ago. To his surprise, Hitler remembers it well. 'He was quite charming to me for a few moments.' Then the orchestra strikes up, and the overture begins. The two men never meet again.

Over the years,† John often tells this tale of his unexpected brush with Adolf Hitler. 'For a few seconds, perhaps, I held the history of Europe in my rather clumsy hands. He was only shaken up, but had I killed him, it would have changed the history of the world,' he concludes of his own peculiar one on one.

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* Now the Cuvilliés-Theater.

† In 1946 he inherits the title Baron Howard de Walden. He dies in 1999, aged eighty-six. Hitler dies in 1945, aged fifty-six.

JOHN SCOTT-ELLIS

TALKS OF THE BOCHE WITH

RUDYARD KIPLING

Chirk Castle, Wrexham, North Wales
Summer 1923

In the summer of 1923, John Scott-Ellis is still only ten years old, yet he has already lunched with G.K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw.

John lives in a vast thirteenth-century castle. His father, the eighth Baron Howard de Walden, dabbles in the arts, writing operas, poetry and plays. At one time he owned the Haymarket Theatre, putting on a good many highbrow productions, including works by Henrik Ibsen. When these failed to make money, he was persuaded to stage a comedy called *Bunty Pulls the Strings*; it ran for three years.

The eighth Baron's castle acts as a tremendous draw to artists and writers. Young John is now used to passing the time of day with Hilaire Belloc, Augustus John, George Moore or Max Beerbohm. Some of these grandees are more friendly than others. Belloc teaches him all sorts of tricks with paper, such as how to make a bird which flaps its wings when you pull its tail. By cutting out two triangles and placing them on a sheet of paper in a particular way, he also shows him an easy way to prove Pythagoras' Theorem. 'While I remember how to do this, I am sad to have forgotten his absolute proof of the Trinity, which he demonstrated in a somewhat similar fashion,' John recalls in old age. He remembers, too, the Irish novelist George Moore ('always rather preoccupied') tackling his father with a problem he was finding impossible to solve.

'I keep on writing down "she was in the habit of wearing a habit", and it isn't right and I can't think how to alter it.'

'What about, "she was used to wearing a habit"?' suggested Lord Howard de Walden. Moore went away happy.

In the summer of 1923, Rudyard Kipling comes to stay at Chirk. The great author and the young boy go for a walk around the garden together. It was in such a setting that Hugh Walpole observed of the five-foot-

three-inch Kipling, 'When he walks about the garden, his eyebrows are all that are really visible of him.'

At the age of fifty-seven, Kipling encourages children to call him Uncle Ruddy. He finds it hard to make friends with adults, but speaks to children as equals, which is how he writes for them too. 'I would sooner make a fair book of stories for children than a new religion or a completely revised framework for our social and political life,' he explains.

Among children, he becomes a child. On a trip to South Africa, he lay himself flat on the deck to teach a little boy how to play with soldiers. But he can be short-tempered with those who lack his sense of adventure. He once handed his revolver to a youngster and urged him to fire it. Seeing him hesitate, Kipling snapped, 'At your age I would have given *anything* to shoot a revolver!'

But Kipling and John operate on the same wavelength. Kipling has long been fascinated by the paranormal, so he is perhaps attracted by the boy's unusual powers: John is able to throw a pack of cards face down on the floor and then pick out the four aces. 'I claim absolutely no strange powers but probably I had, or even have, this ESP slightly higher than others,' he recollects. One afternoon, a visiting Admiral with an interest in psychic matters asks him to throw two dice, and wish for high. 'For about twenty throws or more I never threw less than four and frequently double sixes.' The Admiral then tells him to wish for low. 'I started with double ones and continued in much the same vein.'

On their walk around the garden, John chats with Rudyard Kipling about Germans. Kipling says he hates them. Their talk turns to aeroplanes. Kipling says they are always trying to knock down his chimneys.

John asks him if he would ever travel in an airship.

'What!' exclaims Kipling. 'Locked in a silver coffin with lots of Boche?!'

Such a quote may seem almost too good to be true, but Kipling has a curious capacity to become his own caricature. Dining with Somerset Maugham at the Villa Mauresque, the conversation turned to a mutual friend. When Kipling declared, 'He's a white man,' Maugham thought to himself, 'This is characteristic. How I wish, in order to fulfil my preconceptions of him, he would say he was a pukka sahib.'

'He's a pukka sahib all right,' continued Kipling.

After their walk, Kipling accepts John's invitation to take a look at John's collection of his complete works in their smart red-leather pocket edition. Kipling offers to sign them for him, but as if by magic, Kipling's formidable wife Carrie suddenly swoops into the room and tells him not to. This, too, is characteristic. Carrie spends her time protecting her husband from his readers, and is often derided for it. To Lady Colefax she is 'a super-bossy second-rate American woman, the sort of woman you could only speak to about servants'. A young boy called Henry Fielden was in the habit of dropping in at Kipling's house, Bateman's, to borrow books. Once when he arrived he saw Kipling standing at the window, so he waved, and Kipling waved back. But when Henry knocked on the front door, a maid told him that Mr Kipling was not at home. Henry insisted that they had just waved to each other, and the maid rushed away in confusion. A short while later, a furious Mrs Kipling appeared, saying through tight lips that her husband would be down in a minute.

The day after their interrupted book-signing, Kipling takes John to the sheepdog trials in Llangollen. John notes how comfortable Kipling is in the company of the shepherds, 'getting them to talk and explain all about the trials and their lives'. On their way home, Kipling promises to write a story about these very shepherds. 'But sadly,' observes John, by now an old man, 'he never got round to it.'

RUDYARD KIPLING

HERO-WORSHIPS

MARK TWAIN

Elmira, New York State
June 1889

In 1889, Rudyard Kipling is twenty-three years old, though he looks closer to forty. He arrives in San Francisco on May 28th, after a twenty-day voyage from Japan.

He is greedy for life. He witnesses a gunfight in Chinatown, lands a twelve-pound salmon in Oregon, meets cowboys in Montana, is appalled by Chicago, and falls in love with his future wife in Beaver, north Pennsylvania.

Before he leaves the United States, he is determined to meet his hero, Mark Twain. He goes on a wild-goose chase – to Buffalo, then Toronto, then Boston – before tracking him down to Elmira, where a policeman tells him he spotted Twain 'or someone very like him' driving a buggy through town the day before. 'He lives out yonder at East Hill, three miles from here.'

At East Hill, he is informed that Twain is at his brother-in-law's house downtown. He finds the house and rings the doorbell, but then has second thoughts. 'It occurred to me for the first time Mark Twain might possibly have other engagements than the entertainment of escaped lunatics from India.'

He is led into a big, dark drawing room. There, in a huge chair, he finds the fifty-three-year-old author of *Tom Sawyer* with 'a mane of grizzled hair, a brown mustache covering a mouth as delicate as a woman's, a strong, square hand shaking mine and the slowest, calmest, levellest voice in all the world … I was shaking his hand. I was smoking his cigar, and I was hearing him talk – this man I had learned to love and admire 14,000 miles away.'

Kipling is transfixed. 'That was a moment to be remembered; the landing of a twelve-pound salmon was nothing to it. I had hooked Mark

Twain, and he was treating me as though under certain circumstances I might be an equal.'

The two men discuss the difficulties of copyright before moving on to Twain's work. 'Growing bold, and feeling that I had a few hundred thousand folk at my back, I demanded whether Tom Sawyer married Judge Thatcher's daughter and whether we were ever going to hear of Tom Sawyer as a man.'

Twain gets up, fills his pipe, and paces the room in his bedroom slippers. 'I haven't decided. I have a notion of writing the sequel to *Tom Sawyer* in two ways. In one I would make him rise to great honor and go to Congress, and in the other I should hang him. Then the friends and enemies of the book could take their choice.'

Kipling raises a voice of protest: to him, Tom Sawyer is real.

'Oh, he *is* real. He's all the boys that I have known or recollect; but that would be a good way of ending the book, because, when you come to think of it, neither religion, training, nor education avails anything against the force of circumstances that drive a man. Suppose we took the next four and twenty years of Tom Sawyer's life, and gave a little joggle to the circumstances that controlled him. He would, logically and according to the joggle, turn out a rip or an angel.'

'Do you believe that, then?'

'I think so; isn't it what you call kismet?'

'Yes; but don't give him two joggles and show the result, because he isn't your property any more. He belongs to us.'

Twain laughs. They move on to autobiography. 'I believe it is impossible for a man to tell the truth about himself or to avoid impressing the reader with the truth about himself,' Twain says. 'I made an experiment once. I got a friend of mine – a man painfully given to speak the truth on all occasions – a man who wouldn't dream of telling a lie – and I made him write his autobiography for his own amusement and mine … good, honest man that he was, in every single detail of his life that I knew about he turned out, on paper, a formidable liar. He could not help himself.'*

* Twain is equally flexible with the truth of stories about other people's lives. As a young journalist, he regularly makes up stories and puts them in the local newspaper. When someone falls out with his older brother, he gets his own back by writing a story headlined 'Local Man Resolves to Commit Suicide'.

As Twain walks up and down talking and puffing away, Kipling finds himself coveting his cob pipe. 'I understood why certain savage tribes ardently desire the liver of brave men slain in combat. That pipe would have given me, perhaps, a hint of his keen insight into the souls of men. But he never laid it aside within stealing reach.'

Twain talks of the books he likes to read. 'I never cared for fiction or story-books. What I like to read about are facts and statistics of any kind. If they are only facts about the raising of radishes, they interest me. Just now for instance, before you came in, I was reading an article about mathematics. Perfectly pure mathematics. My own knowledge of mathematics stops at "twelve times twelve" but I enjoyed that article immensely. I didn't understand a word of it; but facts, or what a man believes to be facts, are always delightful.'

After two hours, the interview comes to an end. The great man, who never minds talking, assures his disciple that he has not interrupted him in the least.*

Seventeen years on, Rudyard Kipling is world famous. Twain grows nostalgic for the time he spent in his company. 'I believe that he knew more than any person I had met before, and he knew I knew less than any person he had met before … When he was gone, Mr Langdon wanted to know about my visitor. I said, "He is a stranger to me but is a most

* Kipling himself proves less gracious with journalists. Just three years later, in 1892, during his ill-fated time living outside Brattleboro in Vermont, a journalist from the Boston *Sunday Herald* drops by. The two men have an altercation outside the house. 'I refuse to be interviewed,' says Kipling. 'It is a crime. I never was. I never will be. You have no more right to stop me for this than to hold me up like a highwayman. It is an outrage to assault a man on the public way. In fact this is worse.'

The journalist won't take no for an answer, and tries every ploy. 'Mr Kipling, you are a citizen of the world, and you owe it something and it owes you.'

'Yes, and that little debt has got to be paid me first, and I shall never pay mine.'

'You were a member of the press, and the profession wants to know what you have to say. You owe it something.'

'Damn little.'

'… Why, Mr Kipling, I wouldn't have missed this interview, to use your favourite word, for anything.'

'You haven't got anything anyway.'

'Oh yes I have. I've got enough to tell people to keep away from you.'

'That's what I want … Say I am a boor, for I am, and I want people to learn it and let me alone.'

With that, Rudyard Kipling slams the door.

remarkable man – and I am the other one. Between us, we cover all knowledge; he knows all that can be known, and I know the rest."'

Twain, now aged seventy, is addicted to Kipling's works. He rereads *Kim* every year, 'and in this way I go back to India without fatigue … I am not acquainted with my own books but I know Kipling's books.They never grow pale to me; they keep their colour; they are always fresh.'

The worshipped has become the worshipper.