

# CHAPTERS FROM STORYTELLING HISTORY

## RUDYARD KIPLING: JUST SO STORIES

Kipling is not a fashionable author these days and has not been so for many years. This is largely down to his style and to his subject matter but even more due to misunderstandings surrounding his attitude to the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. He is often portrayed as a jingoistic 'hawk' who shamed his son into joining up and subsequently being killed. This is a superficial reading but, anyway, it is largely irrelevant for this article.

I was not a Kipling fan when I was young; I didn't like the Jungle Book so didn't read any more although I must have come across some of the Just So Stories somewhere because I know the first one, 'How the Whale Got His Throat', very well. I am a fan of Kipling's poetry, particularly The Barrack Room ballads, which illustrate brilliantly the way the British Empire thought of and treated its soldiers:

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Chuck him out, the brute!'  
But it's 'Saviour of 'is country' when the guns begin to shoot;  
An' it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything you please;  
An' Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool – you bet that Tommy sees!

(If you haven't heard English folk singer the late Peter Bellamy's settings of the ballads seek them out, they are great!)

Others of his poems illustrate the Edwardian attitude to India and Indians and foreigners generally. Some of those poems are impossible to use in public nowadays because of the non-PC language and the racist attitudes they include – not necessarily the views of Kipling but of Britain and the British generally.

The Just So Stories were first published in 1897 but some were 'made up' almost a decade before that when Kipling's daughter Josephine (Effie) was a baby. They were intended to be oral



stories and they got their name because of their purpose: "but in the evening there were stories meant to put Effie to sleep, and you were not allowed to alter those by one single little word. They had to be told *just so*; or Effie would wake up and put back the missing sentence." I'm sure every parent can recognise that scenario!

Some biographers have said that Kipling was not a very loving father but these stories prove he was. He could not have written them if he didn't adore Effie and enjoy spending time with her, whether going on walks, putting her to bed, pulling her around the polished floor on a rug or encouraging her to think.

I suspect that the first one or two just happened and then, when he hit upon the idea of putting them in a book he looked for other stories which fitted the pattern. And where did he look? Into folk tales from all around the world. Kipling was a bit of a nomad. He was born in India and then came to England. Later, as an adult, he returned to India and other places in the East, went to USA and South America and even spent time in Africa. Wherever he was

he picked up tales from the locals and used them in his writings – fiction and non-fiction.

The sources for the Just So stories read like a folklore encyclopaedia:

The obvious source for How the Whale Got His Throat is the story of Jonah but it is coloured by Muslim versions. There are also illusions to the Amazing Adventures of Baron Munchausen and the Odyssey.

How the Camel Got His Hump again draws on Muslim sources. Some of the language throughout the book has been said to stem from a family joke about the overblown language of Lane's version of the Arabian Nights.

How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin probably comes from the same source – a rhino crops up in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Voyage of Sindibad.

How the Leopard Got His Spots might have Biblical overtones or come from a South African tale as does The Elephants Child (the tug of war between the elephant and the crocodile has become a well known image but whether it pre-dates Kipling or comes from him varies.)

Kipling visited Brazil in 1927 and the Beginning of Armadillos and The Manie Mouthes of Ye Amazons were probably inspired by that trip.

The two stories How the First Letter Was Written and How the Alphabet Was Made don't seem to fit easily with the rest of the collection – they'd be more at home in the British based books like Puck of Pooks Hill. They probably developed from games he played with his children to encourage them to read, write and think.

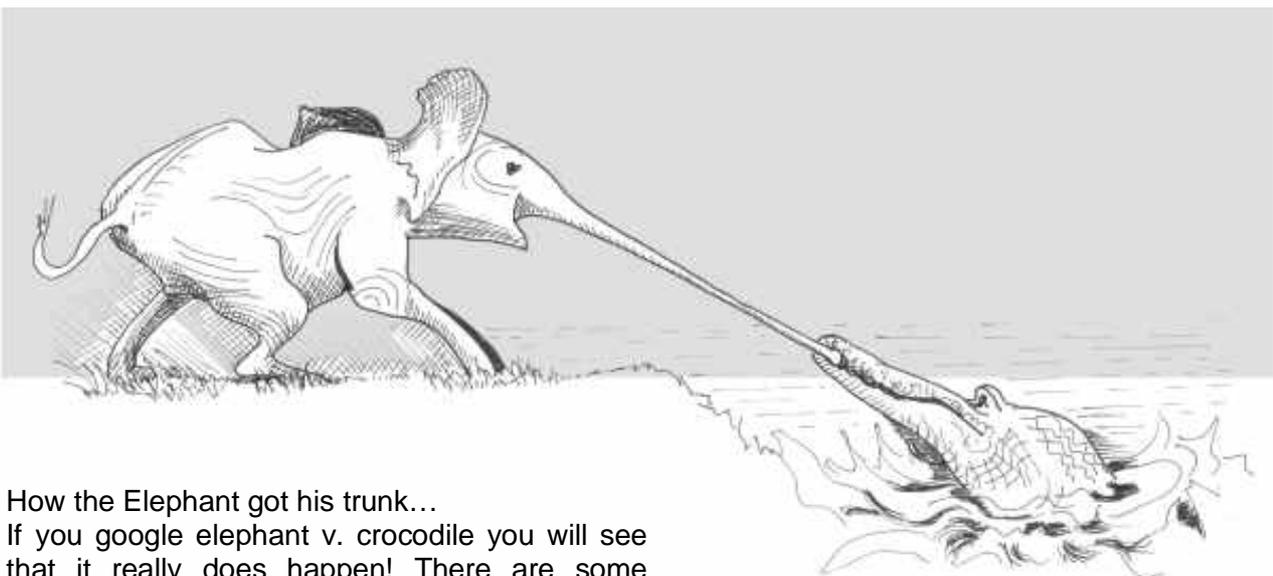
There is no doubt as to where Kipling got the idea for The Crab That Played With the Sea for in 1935 he wrote to W.W.Skeat "You sent me, years ago, your Malay Magic out of which I took ('pinched' is another word for it) my tale of The Crab That Played With the Tides..."

The lovely story of The Cat That Walked By Himself seems to have been based on the legend that a cat visited the infant Christ in the stable and purred him to sleep but it also contains a rather satirical picture of Kipling's wife, Carrie, and their own family.

For The Butterfly that stamped we return to Biblical and Koranic sources and legends about King Solomon. It's one of my favourite tales from the collection.

The whole collection of Just So Stories is very mixed – mixed sources, mixed themes, mixed styles and, I think, mixed quality. The best of them could easily enter any storyteller's repertoire and infant/junior aged children would love them. Have a look.

(Also worth a look is the collection it inspired Ted Hughes to write: Tales of the Early World, and if you can get hold of a recording of him reading them in his rich Yorkshire voice that's even better!)



How the Elephant got his trunk...

If you google elephant v. crocodile you will see that it really does happen! There are some amazing pictures if you click 'Images'.