

## **Rudyard Kipling at Vernet-les-Bains** *Sam Collett, 2002*

Whenever Vernet-les-Bains wins a mention in travel writing, there is a fair chance that the reader will be told that Rudyard Kipling<sup>1</sup>, the writer and poet, was a regular visitor to Vernet in the years leading up to the First World War. But this fact is usually only mentioned in passing and I for one had no idea, until recently, why Kipling went to Vernet or what he did with his days in this village, tucked away in the eastern Pyrenees.

The key to finding out more about Kipling's time at Vernet has come with the publication of "The Letters of Rudyard Kipling", an imposing four volume work edited (and superbly so) by Thomas Pinney<sup>2</sup>. At last we can read some substantive facts about those days on the banks of the Cady, and from the pen of Kipling himself. A couple of the more recent Kipling biographies<sup>3</sup> also help to set the scene for that period of his life.

It was Rudyard Kipling's wife, Caroline, who took the Kiplings to Vernet, or rather, her poor health took them there. In February 1910, during a winter sports holiday at Engelberg in Switzerland, 'Carrie' Kipling became seriously troubled by some form of rheumatism or arthritis (she was forty seven, Kipling forty five). She went to Zurich to consult a specialist and the doctor advised her that treatment with the waters at Vernet-les-Bains might ease her symptoms. Three weeks later the Kiplings left Switzerland and instead of returning immediately to their home in Sussex, England, as originally planned, they went first to Vernet. They arrived on 2 March with their daughter Elsie and took rooms at the Grand Hotel de Portugal.

Rudyard Kipling described his initial impressions of Vernet in a letter to his son John, who had already returned to school in England: "Vernet is a queer little brown stone town among bare hills which rather remind one of the Karoo<sup>4</sup>, surrounded by high mountains on which snow still lingers. It is very crisp and cold but very bright. We went climbing up the mountain paths before lunch and found a cork-tree. I cut off a bit of the bark to bring home to you. We haven't quite settled down here yet because the rooms they have given us are not very nice and we want them to change us to some other side of the hotel where we can get more sunshine." And they did get better rooms, by moving to the Hotel du Parc.

Life at Vernet soon took on a routine: "Mother is taking her sulphur baths and drinking her sulphur water and I think it is doing her good I have an awful bath every other day. I lie on a sort of bed where water (hot and smelly) is squirted on me from a sort of garden hose and a man in red and white bathing drawers pounds and pummells and twists and tortures my arms and legs. One feels very slack for an hour afterwards but after that hour one feels very light and comfortable. When we aren't bathing or resting after our baths, we climb these great grey and black and yellow hills and watch the flowers come out....Today Mother and I went up to a little village in the valley, while Elsie played tennis with a girl here. We saw a woman and three kids each with a long pole, driving a cow and two bullocks to pasture. The cow had the bell round her neck stuffed up with hay so that it should not ring. She stopped for a drink at a brook and one of the calves promptly pulled the hay out of the bell and ate it. So like a calf!....Mother seems to be better...and I am as usual very fit.."

Lord Montagu of Beaulieu<sup>5</sup> called by to see the Kiplings a few days after their arrival and took them in his Rolls-Royce to lunch at Mont Louis: "We saw it on the map but did not in the least realise how high it was. It was more than 5,400 feet above the sea. Down here [at Vernet], which is only 2,000 feet, it was warm and dusty. We climbed along a road built on the sides of the mountains ...and at last we found bits of drifted snow on the road and the air much cooler. Then we came to a sheet of ice on the road and got up to a huge stone fort...We entered it through a stone gateway...and found a tiny little street where the snow was lying swept up to four feet high...We had lunch at a funny little hotel and then went on to...the Col de la Perche...the snow was six feet high on each side of us and the car was up to its axles in drifts...we saw people skiing, just like at Engelberg, and we wanted to take their skis and play ourselves....The railway line was all snowed up...we ran back to Vernet in a little more than one hour and the sensation as we came down was....like dropping in a balloon."

The Kiplings were at Vernet for a month. Their life there was dominated by Carrie's needs and was largely uneventful. As Rudyard Kipling explained to his son: "...there is not much to tell you when

one's days are filled up with washes and walks". It was now nearly three months since the Kiplings had left England. Rudyard Kipling began to get homesick for Sussex, where spring would soon be breaking. He told the daughter of an old friend: "We'll hope to see you about the time of apple blossom or nightingales if that fits. I could write volumes about sulphur water and baths but I spare you. They s-t-i-n-k".

Carrie Kipling's treatment at Vernet in 1910 was so successful that a year later, on 20 February 1911, after another winter holiday in Switzerland, the Kiplings returned to the banks of the Cady. They went back to the Hotel du Parc and again stayed for a month. But Carrie's experiences in 1911 were not to be as positive as they had been in the previous year. Rudyard Kipling explained to a friend, Colonel Feilden: "We came to Vernet, *not* because Carrie was bad with rheumatism but because it did her so much good last year... She hadn't a twinge all the time we were [in Switzerland] but, within the past few days she has had a regular siege of it and says things not to be written down. Carrie takes sulphur baths in her own room but has not yet begun the drastic course of massage 'sous l'eau' that makes her swear yet makes her better...". But the Kiplings had a degree of faith in the curative powers of the Vernet waters and Rudyard Kipling would soon be telling Stanley Baldwin<sup>6</sup> that Carrie had "gone in for baths religiously – hot ones with massage and still hotter ones without", until the day that she had to take to her bed, racked with pain..."She was far better afterwards for having come last year; so I hope she will be better this year – if she lives to pull through. She is next door, still in bed knitting and arguing that such drastic results must lead to something. I agree with her."

Despite Carrie's painful reaction to the Vernet treatments in 1911, Rudyard Kipling still felt that he and she were benefiting from their second visit to the resort. He told Colonel Feilden: "...it's a very good place for nerves ...we've both been a bit strained<sup>7</sup>...rest is what we need. It's the quietest life under the sun." Kipling gives the impression of wanting more English male company and he tried to persuade Feilden to come to Vernet: "...what a pleasant English Club, with all papers....and what comfortable rooms could be obtained....and how you'd revel in the land". He asked Feilden to send to him "...a dozen trout-flies of a kind guaranteed to allure the Catalan trout...the Cady is full of rude little trout who make faces at me and I don't think I can put up with it much longer...the water is beautiful but colder than anything out of Switzerland. It has been a late winter, with lots of snow which is still lying all about in patches. But the sun is Spanish and stabs through the gorges like a knife; the hellebore is out and peacock and brimstone butterflies sit on rocks...". With rather impish humour, Kipling told Feilden that he should bring his wife too because she might enjoy being "washed, rewashed and yet again washed". Kipling had by now become rather attached to Vernet, though there are only brief glimpses of this in his letters, as when he regretted that Frank Doubleday<sup>8</sup> was unable to visit Vernet "because this is a lovely place" and when he told Stanley Baldwin that Vernet was "a cheerful sort of place – a pool of Bethesda plus a casino and streaks of snow on the mountains".

When the Kiplings first arrived in Vernet that year, there had been snow on the ground. Two weeks of glorious weather followed. Then it snowed again, prompting Kipling to write a short story about the weather and the English: "Why snow falls at Vernet". The story was published in "The Merry Thought", an English-language magazine produced at Vernet. In the tale two English knights on their way home from Antioch at the end of the First Crusade go to Vernet, hoping to find relief from their lumbago....

It was also during this 1911 stay that Rudyard Kipling wrote a letter to George Auriol in praise of the Canigou, which is still much quoted in its French translation:

"I came in search of nothing more than a little sunshine, but I found the Canigou, whom I discovered to be a magician among mountains<sup>9</sup> and I submitted myself to his power. At first he could reproduce for me, according to the thought or desire of the moment, either a peak of the Himalayas or the outlines of certain hills in South Africa which are dear to me; transporting me, for example, to the still heat and unforgettable smell of the pines behind my house under Table Mountain, at the instant when I expected to hear the horns of some Hindu temple upon his upper slopes. But this year he has taken to himself his own place in my mind and heart, and I watch him with wonder and delight. Nothing that he could do or give birth to would now surprise me, whether I met Don Quixote himself riding in from the Spanish side, or all the chivalry of ancient France watering their horses at his streams, or saw (which each twilight seems quite possible) gnomes and kobbolds swarming out of the mines and tunnels of his flanks. That is the reason, my dear Monsieur Auriol, why I venture to subscribe myself among the number of the loyal subjects of Canigou."

As well as being a Canigou watcher, Kipling spent a good deal of time observing, as he always did, his fellow humans. In Vernet in 1911 they included Lord and Lady Roberts<sup>10</sup>, old acquaintances of the Kiplings who had arrived at the end of February. This was the year when Lord Roberts would lay the foundation stone of Vernet's Anglican Church of St George. Lord and Lady Roberts had come to Vernet for more or less the same reason as the Kiplings. Lady Roberts, "aged 73 and almost shapelessly fat", (as Kipling described her to his friend Feilden) had a rheumatic condition and hoped that it might respond to treatment with the Vernet waters. And so it did and Kipling was soon reporting to Feilden that Lady "Bobs", as he called her, had "benefited hugely by the treatment here – pulse stronger, pains fewer and capable of walking both on the flat and up and down stairs". Lord Roberts, Kipling told Stanley Baldwin, was "as tough an old nut as ever was made: walks about at unearthly hours of the morning and looks as fit as a flea". He added, in typically direct but good-humoured terms, that Lady Roberts was "being washed – on the instalment plan I should imagine – for she is enormous".

Lord Roberts, who held the rank of Field Marshall in the British army, was invited by the commander of the local area garrison to meet him for an exchange of views at the Hotel de Portugal. Rudyard Kipling, who spoke confident but far from perfect French, agreed to act as interpreter. The Archbishop of Perpignan was also present.

In mid-March the Kiplings took a day off their bathing routine to visit the Côte Vermeille, driving with American friends in "a huge loose-limbed long-bodied 75 horse power De Dietrich". Rudyard Kipling wrote enthusiastically about it all to his friend Feilden: "But Lord what a journey! A divine blue day with a keen wind...but quite warm....Then the Mediterranean hove up, all sapphire, with a shark's fin of a lateen sail here and there and a rip or two of white wave tops before the wind, and forty foot palms...waving in the hollows of the hills against the coast. We lunched at Port Vendres – a large Catalan lunch – but I made my meal chiefly of Bouillabaisse. Never met it before; never knew it could be so perfect...". They then took another day away from the waters, this time going to Perpignan with one of the owners of their hotel, Émile Kiesler, to have lunch at the Lion d'Or, "...a lunch of a beauty and a succulence which made one weep...locally made paté de foie gras (fresh and lovely), oysters from Arcachon (weeping bitterly I had to pass them), omelette with tips of wild asparagus (a dream), grilled sole (a revelation), tripes à la mode de Caen (a delight), *fresh* peas from the Spanish frontier with a tournedos sitting on a crust of bread soaked in some magic sauce!!! (indescribable!). Then a soufflé unlike any soufflé that ever souffled, with strawberry jam of whole strawberries. Carrie...gorged herself to the edge of apoplexy...I stuffed me to the limit of rotundity. After which we went to see the cathedral and thence by natural transition the Bishop – a delightful old man...A charming talker, a mountaineer, no mean archaeologist and an authority on Catalan poems and traditions. You'd have rejoiced in him...Thence to the Citadel...So home in the grey misty evening light with the clouds banking heavily over Canigou...".

Kipling was once more becoming homesick and told Feilden that "*never* have I *so* keenly wished to return to Bateman's<sup>11</sup>...". He had arranged for a Rolls Royce, with chauffeur, to be sent out from England at the end of their stay at Vernet. In the letter confirming the arrangement he said, jokingly but showing a touch of snobbism too: "This place, which was reasonably quiet last year, simply stinks and fizzles with every make of car except Rolls Royce. It's a Christian duty to raise the tone of the community". Once the car arrived, the Kiplings started on their journey home, leaving Vernet at the end of March and visiting Narbonne, Montpellier and Carcassonne before heading north. They took a leisurely eleven days to reach the Channel coast.

In 1912 the Kiplings went to Venice after their winter holiday in Switzerland and in 1913 to Egypt. It was not until February 1914 that they went back to Vernet, once again after Switzerland, for their third and final visit. They stayed for about a month but Rudyard Kipling's mind was elsewhere. Politics, and especially the future of Ireland, dominate his Vernet letters in 1914. There are only brief lines on life at Vernet. On this last visit, Vernet became a "place of Superior Dullness" for Kipling, tolerable, but only just, because of the benefit to Carrie and the peacefulness of the place. He told Colonel Feilden: "I have been taking baths – to keep the wife in countenance – a process which reduces life rather to the level of a convict prison. One day I am massaged under water ....a lengthy operation that ends in sending me to sleep for about an hour... On alternate days I swim (and that's a treat) in the big hot sulphur bath...I am getting elegantly narrow ...The wife's treatment is the same...she is standing it

very well. She benefits by it afterwards and gladly suffers the dislocation and disarticulation. It is late spring here – raw cold for the most part with nothing doing in nature's line except the wild hellebore, snowdrops and violets. Birds few and shy *except* the hawks who I imagine have had their rations reduced by the late snows. Today is muggy and raining – an attempt at spring-like weather. Words cannot paint the unbelievable but delightful dullness of life. We make our washing an excuse to live in utter peace...". Kipling summed up their life at Vernet in 1914 for another friend by saying that Carrie had "found great good out of her course of baths and is really set up by it, which is a thing worth all the rest...".

Within five months the First World War had broken out. In September 1915 their only son, John, was killed at the Battle of Loos<sup>12</sup>. He was just eighteen. Rudyard and Carrie Kipling were devastated.

In the years after the war the Kiplings resumed their travels. In March 1925 they passed along the foot of the Pyrenees, during a motoring tour of France, and called briefly at Lourdes and Biarritz, but not to stay. The Kiplings did not return to Vernet after 1914. Their lives had moved on.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudyard Kipling, 1865-1936. Born in India of English parents. Educated in England. Developed his authorship skills while a journalist in India, 1882-89, writing popular stories and poems about the rulers and the ruled. On his return to England, aged only 23, he was acclaimed as a major literary figure. In 1892 he married Caroline Balestier, sister of his US agent. They lived in Vermont until 1896 before moving back to England. In 1907 Kipling was awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature. Kipling has long been a controversial figure, mainly because of his support for imperial rule and his antipathy towards liberalism and feminism, but his works continue to be read. He is to this day admired by many and is still widely quoted.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Pinney (Editor), "The Letters of Rudyard Kipling", Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke RG 21 6XS, England; Vol 1 (1872-89) & Vol 2 (1890-99) published 1990; Vol 3 (1900-10) published 1996; Vol 4 (1911-19) published 1999. Extracts from Volumes 3 & 4 in this article are published with the kind permission of Thomas Pinney. This article owes much of its content, including all the quotations from Rudyard Kipling's letters, to Thomas Pinney's admirable and much-to-be-recommended work. I gratefully acknowledge my debt to Thomas Pinney and Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Lycett, "Rudyard Kipling", Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1999 (& Phoenix, London, 2000); Harry Ricketts, "The unforgiving minute: a life of Rudyard Kipling", Chatto & Windus, London, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> A semi-desert region of South Africa. Rudyard Kipling made a number of lengthy visits to South Africa around the time of the Boer War (1899-1902).

<sup>5</sup> A motoring enthusiast whose devotion to cars would eventually result in the National Motoring Museum being located at the Montagu family home at Beaulieu, Hampshire. The museum has a 1909 Rolls Royce similar to that in which the Kiplings were taken to Mont Louis.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Baldwin was a cousin of Rudyard Kipling. Baldwin would be Prime Minister of Britain three times in the years after the First World War. Baldwin and Kipling knew each other from early childhood.

<sup>7</sup> In the three months before their arrival in Vernet in 1911, Rudyard Kipling's parents had both died and the Kiplings' son John had been seriously ill.

<sup>8</sup> US publisher of Rudyard Kipling's works who had also become a close friend.

<sup>9</sup> This letter was translated into French and published almost immediately. In the French translation, the words "a magician among mountains" became "une montagne enchantresse", changing the gender of Kipling's quite definitely male sorcerer...

<sup>10</sup> Lord Roberts had been made Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in India in 1885 while Kipling was working there as a journalist. The two developed friendly respect for each other. Lord Roberts had gone on to become the British Commander-in-Chief in South Africa during the Boer War. He and Kipling met again during that conflict.

<sup>11</sup> Bateman's was the Kiplings' family home at Burwash, East Sussex. It was given to the National Trust after Carrie Kipling's death. It is open to the public on many days between April and October.

<sup>12</sup> Soon after the outbreak of the First World War, Lord Roberts had arranged for John Kipling to join the Irish Guards as an officer. A few months before John Kipling was killed in action, Lord Roberts had himself died at the Front, of pneumonia.