

## Chapter 4

### The Imperial Story

Rudyard Kipling – *Stalky & Co.* (1899)

The second half of Victoria's reign was dominated by the expansion and administration of the British Empire. There were wars to be fought and uprisings to put down. Patriotism was all, and with it the willingness to die for Queen and Country. It was up to the public schools to educate and inspire their pupils appropriately; and, increasingly, 'appropriate' came to mean an unquestioning acceptance of authority and a selfless commitment to play for the team. In 1856, on a visit to Eton College, the Duke of Wellington was said to remark, 'It is here that the battle of Waterloo was won!' Later, in 1881, in a swipe at the cult of athleticism that had grown up in the public schools, Matthew Arnold rejoined, 'Disasters have been prepared in those playing-fields as well as victories; disasters due to inadequate mental training – to want of application, knowledge, intelligence, lucidity.'<sup>1</sup> Kipling's *Stalky* would have heartily agreed.

Surprisingly, however, the Empire was rarely an explicit ingredient of Victorian schoolboy fiction and as a story of Empire Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* (1899) stands apart; even so, it has no time for the sort of sentimental jingoism of the time, characterised in Sir Henry Newbolt's poem 'Vitaï Lampada' (1897), in which a cricket match at Clifton College is seen as preparation for imperial adventure:<sup>2</sup>

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1. Matthew Arnold, 'An Eton Boy', in *Fortnightly Review*, June 1881.

2. In fact, the action described in 'Vitaï Lampada', the Battle of Abu Klea in Sudan,

The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
 And England's far, and Honour a name,  
 But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
 'Play up! play up! and play the game!'<sup>3</sup>

Nor does *Stalky & Co.* have any truck with the conservative and moralising school story. Kipling thought little of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and *The Fifth Form of St Dominic's*, but it is *Eric* and Farrar's subsequent novel, *St Winifred's*, given to Stalky by his Aunt on his sixteenth birthday, that are especially derided for their excess of emotion and religion. In the short story 'The Brushwood Boy' (1895), Kipling describes the education of its idealised hero Georgie Cottar: 'the school was not encouraged to dwell on its emotions, but rather to keep in hard condition, avoid false quantities and to enter the army direct'.<sup>4</sup> *Stalky & Co.* is an expanded prospectus for such beliefs and it is not a comfortable read.

*Stalky & Co.* is not a novel in the usual sense, but a collection of nine individual short stories that first appeared in different magazines between 1897 and 1899. The order in which the stories are collected is not the order of their original publication, and the story that might have introduced the collection, 'Stalky', is not included at all. There were later to be four more stories and *The Complete Stalky & Co.*, which added these and 'Stalky', was published in 1929.<sup>5</sup>

Like both *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and *Eric*, *Stalky & Co.* is in part autobiographical. It is set in the United Services College at Westward Ho!, Devon, which Kipling attended from 1878 until 1882. It was a new foundation, set up in 1874 by a company of retired Army and Navy officers with the main purpose of preparing often unpromising boys for entry into Sandhurst, Woolwich and Dartmouth, at a modest fee<sup>6</sup> ('We *aren't* a public school,' says Flint. 'We're a limited liability company payin' four per cent. . . . We've got to get into the Army – or get out').<sup>7</sup> There were no frills, social pretensions or (surprisingly) military trappings, and both food and accommodation were sparse. Initially there were about sixty pupils at the College (who had often either failed to gain entry into public schools, or had been expelled from them)

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was another glorious failure for the British.

3. Sir Henry Newbolt, 'Vitaï Lampada' (1897).

4. Rudyard Kipling, 'The Brushwood Boy' (London, 1895).

5. Rudyard Kipling, *The Complete Stalky & Co.* (London, 1929). The text of a further Stalky story, 'Scylla and Charybdis', has since been discovered.

6. After the Army Act of 1871, Service commissions and promotion had to be obtained by aptitude and examination rather than by wealth, and although the public schools began to open 'Army classes', they were not within everyone's means.

7. Rudyard Kipling, 'A Little Prep', in *Stalky & Co.* (London, 1899).

and at its peak the roll grew to over 200; many of the pupils were sent home from India, where their parents were soldiers or civil servants. At first sight it seems to have been a strange decision to send Kipling to the College. There was never any question of his becoming a soldier (he was very short-sighted), but his parents, who lived in Bombay, knew the College's headmaster, Cormell Price, and could not afford the fees of an established public school. To begin with, Kipling was horribly bullied, but after his first year the unexpectedly liberal atmosphere began to suit him: he did not have to take part in organised games and his talent for writing was encouraged.

The College was housed in a terrace of twelve seafront boarding houses. A corridor was built to connect the houses and there was enough space for a school hall and a gymnasium, but no chapel – let alone as a focal point. Cormell Price, who had run the 'Army class' at Haileybury, was as unconventional as his school. Unusually for headmasters of the time, he was not in holy orders, nor even a committed Christian. He was a left-wing pacifist leading a school that produced soldiers and (despite the vivid accounts in *Stalky & Co.*) he rarely administered corporal punishment. But he was good at his job. He was respected by the boys – even by the real-life Stalky and Co. – as he didn't allow anything to get in the way of extra tuition and he had his ways of negotiating on behalf of his potential officers: 'The Head often ran up to town, where the school devoutly believed he bribed officials for early proofs of the Army Examination papers.'<sup>8</sup> Price retired in 1894 and, as the Indian rupee devalued and public school supply caught up with military demand, numbers at the College dwindled. In 1904, only thirty years after it had opened, it amalgamated with the Imperial Service College, Windsor, which in turn was absorbed by Haileybury College, Hertfordshire, in 1942.

Stalky and Co. are three fifth-form pupils who inhabit Number 5 Study in Mr Prout's house and are very different from the upright heroes of the *Boy's Own* serials. They are in their final year at the College. Stalky is based on the young Major-General Lionel Dunsterville and is the manipulator of the group; McTurk is inspired by George Beresford, an aesthete, who reads Ruskin and would become a noted photographer; and Beetle, who reads and writes poetry, is the embodiment of the teenage Kipling. In each story Stalky engineers an escapade that challenges public school convention, represented by the housemasters, Prout and King; but the risks are calculated and punishment is accepted without complaint. In fact, Stalky and Co. have developed a *modus vivendi* with the masters, and it is only when this is challenged that they come into significant conflict ('Leave them alone or calamity will overtake you,' the chaplain

8. 'A Little Prep' in *Stalky & Co.*

warns his colleagues).<sup>9</sup> Everything in *Stalky & Co.* works on a secular, even humdrum level. There is no suggestion that the boys' souls are ever in danger; no prayers are said (even by the chaplain); no-one suffers very much or dies (except later, in battle). Nor is there any truck with such things as the 'honour of the house' and 'fairness', and King's view that 'by games, and games alone, was salvation wrought' is summarily dismissed.<sup>10</sup> So in an important way *Stalky & Co.* is surprisingly modern, in its selfishness if nothing else (though a hundred years on the archaic schoolboy slang, laced with Latin and French maxims, and the Devon dialect, can be off-putting). Whereas most late-Victorian school stories (like *The Fifth Form at St Dominic's*) still have a whiff of the earnestness of *Tom Brown* and *Eric* about them, Kipling believed that school life has little significance beyond the boundaries of its small world.

### 'In Ambush'

One of the striking characteristics of *Stalky & Co.* is the way in which the stories are largely told through dialogue. The authorial narrator is much less obtrusive than we have seen so far and offers no overt moralising (what moralising there is, is put into the untrustworthy mouths of the masters, while the Head offers less conventional and more pertinent advice). But in their conversation the boys become dramatised narrators, taking the weight of the storytelling, and as readers we are encouraged to see the action from their usually anarchic point of view.

The first of the stories, 'In Ambush', tells how Stalky and Co. set off for an afternoon of reading and smoking.<sup>11</sup> On Colonel Dabney's land, which bristles with forbidding notices, they discover an idyllic spot on the cliff edge, which is described in a rare passage of magical prose:

He parted the tough stems before him, and it was as a window opened on a far view of Lundy, and the deep sea sluggishly nosing the pebbles a couple of hundred feet below. They could hear young jackdaws squawking on the ledges, the hiss and jabber of a nest of hawks somewhere out of sight; and, with great deliberation, Stalky spat on the back of a young rabbit sunning himself far down where only a cliff-rabbit could have found foot-hold. Great grey and black gulls

9. 'The Impressionists' in *Stalky & Co.*

10. 'An Unsavory Interlude' in *Stalky & Co.*

11. Unusually, smoking was permitted at the United Services College. This was a commercial more than a moral choice since the London 'crammers', its main competitors, also allowed pupils to smoke.

screamed against the jackdaws; the heavy-scented acres of bloom round them were alive with low-nesting birds, singing or silent as the shadow of the wheeling hawks passed and returned; and on the naked turf across the combe rabbits thumped and frolicked.<sup>12</sup>

What is striking here is the gentle assault on our senses: the ‘window’ that gives a view across the sea to Lundy Island, the frolicking rabbits and the birds wheeling overhead, the ‘heavy-scent’ of the flora and the cacophony of sound from the sea ‘nosing the pebbles’, ‘the hiss and jabber’ of hawks, the scream of gulls and jackdaws, the song of the low-nesting birds, and the thump of rabbits. It is a sparkling medley of alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia, just held back from excess by Stalky’s casual spitting on the sunbathing rabbit below. But when Dabney’s gamekeeper attempts to shoot a fox, McTurk, descended from Irish gentry, is incensed and, trespasser or not, complains loudly to Colonel Dabney – no longer a College boy but a ‘landed man speaking to his equal’, ‘deep calling to deep’.<sup>13</sup> Unexpectedly, Stalky and Co. are befriended by the Colonel, treated to beer and food, and given the run of his estate.

Much of the comedy of *Stalky & Co.* comes from the ingenious plotting of Stalky and the verbal fireworks that ensue. So when on one of their subsequent expeditions the boys realise that the masters are planning to follow them (‘we’ll be *suivi*’), Stalky lures them on to Dabney’s estate, where they are apprehended by the lodge-keeper, and Foxy, the College’s Sergeant, roped in for the pursuit by King and Prout, becomes the fall guy: ‘Who’m yeou to give arders here, gingy whiskers? . . . Yiss, I reckon us knows the boys yeou’m after. They’ve two long ears an’ vuzzy bellies, an you nippies they in yeour pocets when they’m dead.’<sup>14</sup> Then the hapless Foxy is harangued deliciously by Dabney as a trespasser disturbing the game birds. It is as if they are back in the army and the Colonel is addressing an insubordinate sergeant:

Why – why – why, ye misbegotten poacher, ye’ll be teaching me my A B C next! Roarin’ like a bull in the bushes down there! . . . Ye’ve a furtive, sneakin’, poachin’ look in your eye, that ’ud ruin the reputation of an archangel! Don’t attempt to deny it! Ye have! A sergeant? More shame to you, then, an’ the worst bargain Her Majesty ever made!<sup>15</sup>

12. ‘In Ambush’ in *Stalky & Co.*

13. ‘In Ambush’ in *Stalky & Co.*

14. ‘In Ambush’ in *Stalky & Co.*

15. ‘In Ambush’ in *Stalky & Co.*

All the time Stalky and Co. are listening from the gatekeeper's cottage, where they are being treated to strawberries and cream. Convulsed in laughter, Beetle has a crochet-work anti-macassar stuffed in his mouth, Stalky buries his head on the horse hair pillow, and McTurk 'is eating the rag-carpet before the speckless hearth'.<sup>16</sup>

On their return to College, Stalky and Co. are accused by the masters of all kinds of 'misdeeds', 'vices', 'villainies', and 'immoralities', but, threatened with a beating and sure of their ground, they appeal to the Head, as is their right. Briefed by Foxy as to what has actually happened, the Head sees it all clearly and, in spite of the boys' carefully preserved innocence, he perpetrates, as he acknowledges, 'a howling injustice' – 'six apiece' (but not very thoroughly executed) – and offers them the loan of his paperback books. King and Prout, it seems, suffer a far more hurtful verbal lashing. 'I swear I'll pray for the Head tonight,' says Beetle.<sup>17</sup>

On one level in 'In Ambush' the reader is drawn to side with Stalky and Co. as rebels against the establishment. They are the ones who tell the tale. But for all the satisfaction we may derive from their triumph, the story is uncomfortable. It is not the refusal of McTurk to support the house matches and to humour poor Prout that is objectionable, but the 'sneer' with which he expresses himself. There is a lot of sneering and gloating in 'In Ambush' and the other stories, betraying an unattractive self-satisfaction in Stalky and Co. It goes further than schoolboy fun and displays an utter lack of concern for others (*'Jamais j'ai gloaté comme je gloaterai aujourd'hui,'* says Stalky in 'An Unsavoury Interlude').<sup>18</sup> And although Stalky and Co. may be the heroes in the book, in the College they are regarded as bullies, who have deliberately set themselves apart: '“They've no following in the school, and they are distinctly – er brutal to their juniors,” said Prout'.<sup>19</sup> It is an irony of which Kipling – a master of irony – must surely have been aware.

### 'Slaves of the Lamp' and 'The Moral Reformers'

When, in 'Slaves of the Lamp', King interrupts a rehearsal of Aladdin and belittles Beetle, Stalky plans revenge. A volley from his catapult from the darkened study assaults Rabbits-Eggs, the local carrier, peppering the rotten cannon of his cart and causing his horse to wheel in the shafts. When King, who is berating Beetle in the approving presence of Manders minor, stands in the gas-lit window to investigate, he becomes the target

16. 'In Ambush' in *Stalky & Co.*

17. 'In Ambush' in *Stalky & Co.*

18. 'An Unsavoury Interlude' in *Stalky & Co.*

19. 'In Ambush' in *Stalky & Co.*

of the enraged Rabbits-Eggs: ‘Yiss, yeou, yeou long-nosed, fower-eyed, gingy-whiskered beggar! Yeu’m tu old for such goin’s on. Aie! Poultrice yeour nose, I tall ’ee! Poultrice yeour long nose!’<sup>20</sup> A hurled flint shatters the window and hits Manders minor; another gives Beetle the excuse to knock over a candle-lamp and drip grease on the Persian rug. When King exits to summon Foxy, Beetle guides Manders’s bleeding head over the Latin papers on King’s table, covers the doorknob with the blood, scars a set of ‘Gibbon’ as if hit by a flint, and spills ink and gum over the floor. There is again something unnaturally sadistic in Beetle’s adding to the destruction of King’s belongings – more than might be caused by King’s recent insults. This, I think, is the bullied Beetle and the bullied Kipling taking revenge for all the bullying they have suffered themselves. Meanwhile, relaxing in a steaming bath, Stalky ponders the evening’s success: ‘“Moi! Je! Ich! Ego!” gasped Stalky. “Wasn’t it beautiful?”’<sup>21</sup> There could be nothing more self-satisfied than that.

Even so, there remains a score for Stalky and Co. to settle with the younger boys in the house: ‘three brisk minutes accounted for many silkworms, pet larvae, French exercises, school caps, half-prepared bones and skulls, and a dozen pots of home-made sloe jam’ – a rout of an entire school life and of jam from a distant home. In the story’s conclusion, McTurk says of King, ‘He begins by bullying little chaps; then he bullies the big chaps; then he bullies some one who isn’t connected with the College, and then catches it.’<sup>22</sup> The irony is still at work.

And it is in ‘The Moral Reformers’ that Stalky and Co. move from bullying the little chaps to bullying the big chaps. Reverend John, the College chaplain, pays a visit to Study 5 to alert them to some bullying that is going on in the house. Beetle recalls his own miserable experience of being bullied (‘corkscrew – brush-drill – keys – head-knucklin – arm twistin’ – rockin – Ag Ags’)<sup>23</sup> and now it seems history is repeating itself with Campbell and Sefton making young Clewer’s life a misery. With the chaplain’s suggestion that Stalky and Co. might put a stop to it ‘in any way you please’, they apply their minds to the business. The idea of making Clewer their study-fag is quickly dismissed (‘He’s a dirty little brute,’ says McTurk; and then, in another swipe at Farrar’s sentimentality, ‘We ain’t goin’ to have any beastly Erickin’. D’you want to walk about with your arm round his neck?’).<sup>24</sup> Then Stalky hatches a plan. Using the sham bullying

20. ‘Slaves of the Lamp’ in *Stalky & Co.*

21. ‘Slaves of the Lamp’ in *Stalky & Co.*

22. ‘Slaves of the Lamp’ in *Stalky & Co.*

23. ‘The Moral Reformers’ in *Stalky & Co.*

24. ‘The Moral Reformers’ in *Stalky & Co.*

of Beetle as bait, Campbell and Sefton are tricked into joining in and are 'joyously' trussed up to take on Beetle and McTurk in a cock fight. But once the pair are immobilised the atmosphere changes, becomes threatening.

The ensuing scene is like something out of a CIA rendition. For Beetle and Kipling, this is more revenge for what once happened to them: '“Molly Fairburn” of the old days could not have done better.' Not only are Campbell and Sefton subjected to all the named but never described tortures, but they are also brutalised psychologically. When it seems they are broken, the punishment continues at a more ferocious but always calculated pitch: 'Now we're goin' to show you what real bullyin' is', as Stalky and Co., with two boxing gloves, rock each of their victims to sleep.<sup>25</sup> Sefton's moustache – or at least some of it – is burned and shaved away, and work continues with cricket stump and strap until the victims are made to sing a chorus of 'Kitty of Coleraine' 'à la Clewer'. 'I've had it done to me', says Beetle coldly; and throughout the whole sickening business, and the helpless tears and the appeals for mercy, comes the refrain, 'The bleatin' of the kid excites the tiger.'<sup>26</sup> Just as Campbell and Sefton have been motivated by Clewer's misery, so Stalky and Co. seem to be driven on by the suffering they inflict. We will meet their like again in Jack Merridew and his savages in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), the subject of chapter 8.

For readers, 'The Moral Reformers' is particularly challenging. What starts as the chaplain's hope to save Clewer from further unhappiness, turns into an intensity of violence that cannot be justified by the outcome. The conclusion has to be not that Stalky and Co. put an end to bullying in the College, but that their own propensity for bullying is heightened, that bullying breeds bullying, and that the cycle continues. The chaplain and Head are complicit in this, and their comfortable agreement to regard the whole affair as boys educating each other and as 'a little business which we have agreed to forget' simply will not do.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Flag of Their Country**

It is strange that the United Services College displayed no outward signs of militarism and had no cadet corps. Drill was only used as a punishment. As the chaplain advises the Head: 'It – it isn't the temper of the school. We prepare for the Army'; and, as Perowne says, 'I'm not goin' to ass about the country with a toy Snider.'<sup>28</sup> For these boys, war is not a game. In 'A Little Prep', we learn that 'nine of us to date' have been killed in action, and here,

25. 'The Moral Reformers' in *Stalky & Co.*

26. 'The Moral Reformers' in *Stalky & Co.*

27. 'The Moral Reformers' in *Stalky & Co.*

28. 'The Flag of Their Country' in *Stalky & Co.*

in ‘The Flag of their Country’, we are told that Hogan will die in Burma and Perowne will be shot in Equatorial Africa by his own men. When the College’s governors insist on the setting up of a cadet corps, it drills without uniforms and behind closed doors – accepted only as an expedient to avoid drill at Sandhurst in the future.

The Head appears to know in advance that the visit of Mr Raymond Martin M.P. to lecture the College on patriotism will be a disaster: he fails to enlighten the visitor about the nature of his audience (‘he seemed to know so much already,’ he says ironically) and he introduces him ‘in a few colourless words’.<sup>29</sup> And so it turns out. As Martin gets into his jingoistic stride, he declares that the boys must look forward ‘to leading their men against the bullets of England’s foes; to confronting the stricken field in all the pride of their youthful manhood’, not beginning to understand that these are things ‘that boys do not discuss even with their most intimate equals’.<sup>30</sup> At the climax of his speech, he unfurls and waves the union flag, expecting rousing cheers, but is met with silence; for the boys, the flag is ‘a matter shut up, sacred and apart’.<sup>31</sup> ‘A Jelly-bellied Flag-flapper,’ says Stalky.<sup>32</sup> When Foxy suggests the Cadet Corps should march in the open, using the flag as its own, Stalky dismisses the troops, runs out ‘white to the lips’ and ‘blubs’.<sup>33</sup> Here is a powerful restating of the central tenet of *Stalky & Co.* – the rejection of all the ‘flumdiddle’ that characterised public schools in the late nineteenth century – but it is hardly enlightened either. It is a one-off, sitting outside the development of the school story, which would indulge again in sentimentalism and before long in the mis-selling of glorious death in the First World War.

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I have said that *Stalky & Co.* is an uncomfortable read, and this is because it is hard to be sure of its moral centre. It does a fine job of debunking the sentimentality of Victorian public schools and school stories, their cult of athleticism, and their jingoism, but it seems to celebrate instead self-satisfaction, bullying, cruelty, and lawlessness. Prout and King may be worthy targets for satire, but, when the laughter stops (and sometimes should we be laughing anyway?) Stalky and Co. are unpleasant young men whose smartness and resourcefulness are always directed at others’ expense. I would like to think that Kipling is being deliberately ironic and that we

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29. ‘The Flag of Their Country’ in *Stalky & Co.*

30. ‘The Flag of Their Country’ in *Stalky & Co.*

31. ‘The Flag of Their Country’ in *Stalky & Co.*

32. ‘The Flag of Their Country’ in *Stalky & Co.*

33. ‘The Flag of Their Country’ in *Stalky & Co.*

are tricked into siding with Stalky and Co. when we should see that they are as unworthy as their victims, the damaged products of a College and of a system that has lost its way and become absurd. Yet I do not believe this is the case. The final story, 'Slaves of the Lamp – Part II', describes Stalky's exploits as an army officer in the Khye-Kheen Hills. He is still breaking rules and resorting to ruses similar to his schoolboy japes, showing that, for all his faults, it is ingenuity, self-confidence and ruthlessness, and not public school 'flumdiddle', that defend the Empire. Perhaps Stalky complements Waugh's Paul Pennyfeather (in *Decline and Fall*),<sup>34</sup> a statement that so-called 'public school values' are valueless in the real world, where only the unpleasant likes of Stalky and Co. will win. More importantly, it seems likely that, whatever his intention, Kipling had not yet got over the bullying he had endured at the College, nor the miserable foster-life he had endured before that, and that *Stalky & Co.* is at root about getting even, about revenge, about outsmarting smartness and delighting in inflicting pain. As Beetle, he appears to bask in Stalky's reflected glory, or is just grateful to be safe as an acolyte; and Stalky, the supreme egotist, must have loved it.

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34. See 'Introductory: Decline and Fall' below.