Rudyard Kipling's Uncollected Speeches

Rudyard Kipling

Published by ELT Press

Kipling, Rudyard.
Rudyard Kipling's Uncollected Speeches: A Second Book of Words.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/11036.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/11036
On the Retirement of Cormell Price

25 July 1894

Cormell Price (1835–1910), the head of the United Services College at Westward Ho! since its opening in 1874, had not yet been celebrated by Kipling as “The Head” in Stalky & Co., and the praise he receives in this speech is not quite in the Stalky vein: an influence making for “obedience, cleanliness, courtesy and courage” seems a little more conventional than what is developed in Stalky & Co. The aim “to make men able to make and keep empires” is perhaps closer.

On the day before he gave this speech Kipling wrote to Henry James that he was going down “to Westward Ho! today to my old school to see my head master retire—a doleful job made nothing better by the prospect of having to deliver a funeral speech” ([24 July 1894]: Letters, II, 142). Mrs. Kipling’s diary records that Kipling went down to Westward Ho! with his father and mother and returned on the 26th “very proud” about having returned to his old school “as a big man.”

In Kipling’s speech nothing is said about the circumstances of Price’s retirement. The College Council, faced with serious financial difficulties at the school, had proposed cost-cutting measures to which Price would not agree and he therefore resigned. As Kipling later wrote of this retirement ceremony, “I made a speech to the Coll. You ought to have heard the boys cheer. It was in the old gym and I nearly broke down. It cut Price to the heart to be forced to go. He hadn’t any money saved and of course he had no pension. Now, the school has gone to pot—and I wish to God it was finally wound up” (to Lionel Dunsterville, 17 February 1899: Letters, II, 366).

I HAVE the very great honour to-night to speak in the name of the Old Boys. We are scattered, as you know, through the five continents and the seven seas: in the garrisons of the Mediterranean, of Hong-Kong, Singapore, and the West Indies: in Her Majesty’s warships; on the horse-ranches of Alberta; in the new towns of British Columbia; in the coast ports of China and Japan, and in the heart of the Australian bush—from Quetta to New Zealand, and from Cape Town to the Argentine. But in spite of the dispersion of our tribes there has been no confusion of tongues. Our College, I venture to say, is held together by bonds of association more personal and intimate than those which link even the oldest of our sister institutions. And the reason is this—we are no more than rationally proud of our school.
That is to say, we only believe it is the absolutely best school in the world, as Devon is the best county in England. But ours is not a tradition of mere bricks and mortar—of ancient buildings and medieval endowments—but rather of direct and individual obligation to the care, tenderness, sympathy, wisdom, insight, and justice of one man—Mr. Price. That obligation I have heard expressed by Old Boys in every part of the world, and it is their message that I bring tonight. It is that sense of debt of one name that makes Westward Ho! from her beginnings to to-day peculiarly one among schools. When Old Boys talk together of the school and her successes it naturally means to them, Mr. Price.

More than any other disciplined body, except, perhaps a regiment, a school owes its weight and worth in the world to its tone. And its tone, for good or evil, it takes from its Head. It would be difficult to say in so many words what “good tone” is; but the most rebellious ruffian that ever toasted a sparrow on a nib over a gas-jet knows what it means after he has been a few years under its influence. In our own case I should say that it means perhaps a fair working average of the ordinary English virtues—obedience, cleanliness, courtesy and courage—developed and created according to the nature and disposition of the boy.

So far we have no prime-ministers on our old roll-calls; no eminent divines and no world-renowned men of science; but we have a reputation confirmed by no less an authority than Lord Roberts, the late commander-in-chief in India, for turning out a good, trustworthy and efficient type of officer. Also, there are a few graves in Burmah and on the Indian frontier that bear witness how our young dead forgot neither themselves nor their school in the day of trial. Indeed our aims are not high! It is not much that we set before us! All that the College—all that Mr. Price—has ever aimed at was to make men able to make and keep empires—successors, that is, to the distinguished officers and gentlemen by whom our school was founded.

I hope—indeed when I look at the material before me—I am sure that the old school will remain true to her traditions, but from this time forward as you know, it must be under a new rule. If Mr. Price found it impossible to postpone his departure till the middle of the Twentieth century, you, and we Old Boys, would still think it much too soon. We would expect him, regardless of his own ease, to go on passing us into Woolwich and Sandhurst, advising us and chastising us for our soul’s good, and entertaining us royally when we came down here to play cricket matches, and to tell the new generation what terrible chaps we were in our time.

But change and quick change is the Law of Service—as your fathers know. It is a hard law, but we must obey. If we were of any other breed than Eng-
lish we might find well-turned and graceful words in which to assure Mr. Price of our love for him—not our affection but our love. Being as we are and what we are, dumb Britons, we can only bid him God-speed, and wish him many good years of the leisure he has earned so well.

—*United Services College Chronicle*, 17 October 1894.