Rudyard Kipling's Uncollected Speeches

Rudyard Kipling

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At a Meeting of the Cape Town Progressive Association

26 January 1903

The meeting, held at the Young Men’s Christian Association in Cape Town, inaugurated the Cape Town Progressive Association in support of the Progressive Party, the party of the English interest in Cape Colony. Cecil Rhodes had died in 1902; his former lieutenant, Dr. Leander Starr Jameson, was now the leader of the Party and was the main speaker at this meeting. Kipling’s speech followed Jameson’s and closed the meeting. Kipling had arrived with his family on their annual visit to South Africa only two weeks before this speech was made; according to Mrs. Kipling’s diary Jameson had called on 25 January, the day before the meeting. Perhaps it was then that Kipling had been asked to participate.

MR. RUDYARD KIPLING, whose rising was the signal for a tremendous outburst of cheers, asked, when quietness was restored: “Ladies and gentlemen, do you consider this constitutional?” (Laughter, and a Voice, “Yes.”) Very good. If you do I can only tell you that I appear before you tonight—although I have kept it dark for obvious reasons for the last two or three years—as a Dutchman by descent—(laughter)—and what is more extraordinary, I believe that is true. (Renewed laughter.) I am given to understand that some 300 years ago, before the Cape was politically organised, there was a Dutch weaver that left Haarlem, in Holland—probably for political reasons—(laughter)—and went over to England. You see the consequences. (Loud laughter.) Proceeding, Mr. Kipling said that he did not wish to take too much upon himself, but it sometimes occurred to him that he had almost as good a claim on that ground to speak for the Dutch as the gentlemen who took that section of our fellow subjects under their wing. Outside that he was an alien in politics, for he had the authority of Mr. Rhodes that he was no sort of a politician. He could only speak as a man who very dearly loved this colony as an outsider, and speaking as an outsider he was afraid that his attitude was something like that of a passenger he heard a yarn about from a man at Southampton once. He was on a steamer (his friend, who told the story, was a stoker on that steamer.) (Laughter.) The passenger was an aged man, and the steamer was making very bad weather. There was a consultation in the engine room, and a lot of hammering about and people giving orders. The ship lay rolling around; presently came the voice of the
passenger down the hatch. The voice said, “It doesn’t make any difference to me; I am prepared to meet my Maker, but you know the weather is bad, and if I were you I would get the engines going in two shakes.” (Loud laughter.) From a political point of view it made no odds to him (Mr. Kipling)—he had a vote in England—but, continued Mr. Kipling, if I were you, gentlemen, I would register, and I should go on registering until someone told me to stop. If I had a private animosity against anybody, if I had a hatchet which I would like to bury in the head of an enemy, I would go and bury it at the Docks. I would combine and organise, and think and eat and sleep in the present political situation. But, soberly, gentlemen, it means life or death to the Colony. Abler men than I have told you this evening of the land’s needs, and you know—who have borne the heat and burden of the day during the last three years—you know perfectly well it needs men, clean, sane, orderly Englishmen, who will tell the honest truth as it deserves. It means irrigation and railways, and it is in the material resources of the land that the development and the future of the Colony lies, and it is for you to put in power a sound, unturnable, orderly-minded Government that will develop the land, the Cape Colony, the most beautiful, and the fairest of all the lands in the world to my mind. (Laughter.) That is the worst of giving advice; people do not agree with it always. If I may close with a simile—you know my deep interest in sporting matters, and particularly in football—if you believe me, I have played the game, you know. It is for you politically to play the game. I don’t know that it has changed since I played Rugby Union. When I was made to play, the team was not encouraged to run about in circles independently—not in playing the game. That is all we have to take to heart. If, as Dr. Jameson has said, and if as I believe, victory will come to you, then the Cape Colony will become the sovereign State in a federation that will one day be to South Africa what Canada is to the Canadians, and what Australia is to the Australians—a nation of a great and free people under Heaven. If that victory be denied, well, perhaps not for the first time, people will say that the Cape of Good Hope is the land of bad faith, and it will be deserved. (Cheers.)

—Cape Times, 27 January 1903.