Rudyard Kipling's Uncollected Speeches

Rudyard Kipling

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To the Automobile Club of South Africa

31 March 1905

Delivered at the third annual banquet of the Automobile Club of South Africa, Mount Nelson Hotel, Cape Town. Kipling’s implicit claim in this speech to have been among the pioneers of automobile travel was well founded. He leased his first car in 1899, and by 1905 had owned a Locomobile and two Lancasters, besides having made trial of some seven others, including a Milnes coupe and four American cars.

The speech was in reply to the toast of “The Automobile Club of Great Britain and Motoring in General.”

MR. RUDYARD KIPLING, who was received with cheers, said that when he listened to the calm and confident optimism of their speeches that night his heart had been heavy within him. The worst of it was that their optimism was entirely justified. The world had at last realized the gospel that they had preached in the highways for the last ten years—namely, that transportation was civilization—(hear, hear)—and was hastening to put their doctrine into effect. At the present moment the inhabitants of that most conservative stronghold, the Strand—he did not mean Somerset Strand (laughter)—but the Strand where Somerset House was—were considering just how quickly they could drop and abandon their hired hairy enemy, the horse, and climb into a motor- omnibus or cab. London cabmen were now taking lessons in driving motors, but he hoped that he would not be one of their first passengers. (Laughter.) The Department of Agriculture at Home had been approached to allow the manufacture of a peculiarly atrocious form of potato spirit, which would supplant their precious and well-beloved petrol. (Laughter.) Through the length and breadth of England arrangements were being made for the delivery of provisions by motor-cars, motor-‘busses, and motor-lorries, and even here he understood recently the driver of a motor-car had run into a local market cart with most striking results. (Laughter.) Yes, gentlemen, the world was with them—almost too much with them. It seemed only yesterday that they were semi-officially described as children of Belial, urging Juggernaut cars over the prostrate forms of a paralysed population. To-day they were no longer a stench in the nostrils of their fellow men; to-day they moved in the odour of sanctity. A generation as quick to praise as it was to blame ascribed to them all the merits of pat-
ent medicine or patent pavements, for they had passed beyond the stage of experiment and were accepted without debate. Their very cars, thanks to the extended mechanical knowledge on the part of maker and purchaser—he spoke with a sad heart—(laughter)—were scarcely more difficult to manipulate than a case of razors. When they went out they proceeded; when they came back they returned. They could go out 6 days a week and he was credibly informed that there were people who did it on Sundays. The legend of the broken-down car being taken home by the broken-down horse would very rapidly take its place with the legend of the mother-in-law and the legend of the lodging-house cat. Let them be warned in time. They were being borne on the greasy flood of success towards unromantic and certain goals; they enjoyed a good reputation. In a very little time they would be discarded and laid aside as a civilising agent, a moral force, one of the dynamic factors of the great march of progress. All men would speak well of them, and the waters of success would close over their heads, and with them the darker waters of respectability, until the airship came into existence, and they would find their president leading the aeroplane club of Cape Town in circles, like a lot of blessed doves, around the roof of the Standard Bank of South Africa. He wished he could adopt a tone that was more optimistic, but, frankly, he could see no break in the gloom of unqualified and reiterated success that threatened to envelop them. (Laughter.) They might urge that, although they had the finest climate and views in the world, yet they had not many miles of roads whereon to run their cars in the sub-continent, but that was a detail. When one looked back over the vista of the last ten years, one realised that the pillars of the temple of felicity were before them—they would be respectable and he could only mourn. In conclusion, Mr. Kipling related an anecdote regarding a certain Mr. Pratt, formerly a cowboy and latterly an embalmer of Booyzen city. Talking to a friend one day, Mr. Pratt said, “Understand, I am not saying a word against embalming; it is wholesome, necessary, and civilising, and everyone has got to come to it sooner or later. But seeing that we are friends, don’t you think life was a heap more interesting when we were all horse-thieves together.” (Laughter and applause.)