Rudyard Kipling's Uncollected Speeches

Rudyard Kipling

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At the Cecil Club Dinner
for Admiral Lord Charles Beresford

13 July 1910

The reforms carried out in the Navy under Admiral Sir John Fisher from 1904 on, though now generally regarded as useful and necessary, raised bitter opposition at the time. Admiral Lord Charles Beresford (1846–1919), an immensely popular figure, “to the general public the best known sailor of his day” (Dictionary of National Biography), was the leader of the opposition party. In 1909 he had been ordered to leave the command of the Channel Fleet. Beresford, who had frequently served in Parliament in the intervals of his Navy service, and who was now M. P. for Portsmouth, succeeded in forcing the government to appoint a cabinet subcommittee to inquire into his charges against Fisher, with results satisfactory to neither side. Kipling, who presided at the Cecil Club dinner at the Hotel Metropole, necessarily took an anti-Fisher line in his praise of Beresford. The Cecil Club, with which Kipling had been familiar at least since 1896, was a Conservative political club. The reference to the Condor is to the gunboat that Beresford commanded at the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882.

MR. RUDYARD KIPLING, in proposing the health of Lord Charles Beresford, said that for practical purposes there were at the present time only two parties in the State. One regarded the Navy as a deliberately designed obstacle to social reform, and the other party looked upon it with qualified and conservative approval. The taxpayers for the most part preferred to look on the Navy as a certain Cabinet Minister said a year or two ago that he looked upon the British Empire—he took it for granted. We did not realize the work of the Navy, but we were kind enough to take it for granted. Their guest that evening belonged to the undesirable or the officially undesired class that was by no means content to take the Navy for granted. He had striven all his life to make the service more equal to the task that would one day be laid upon it. They remembered the legend that the British Navy existed for the defence of the British Empire against external dangers. He was aware that it would be grossly unfashionable to say that some day the Navy might be put to the dread task for which it was made; but if that day came they would need the Navy not only to be instantly ready for war as far as ships and men were concerned, but also to be a Navy with its plans
prepared beforehand to make or to meet any conceivable form of attack. The men must be ready, the ships must be ready, and the national organization for war must above all be ready. It was to these ends that Lord Charles Beresford had devoted all his energies since the day when he commanded the Condor. As they all knew—as all the world knew—he had brought and still brought to his task his unequalled gifts as a leader of men and a born seaman, his experience in a high command, his justly-acquired popularity or adoration among those whom he had commanded, his genius as a tactician and no mean statesman, and the whole weight of his personal and political position. Any man who proposed to serve England in any capacity needed all the weapons that he could command, for, as they knew, he risked his career at every turn, and it would be affectation to say that but for certain political accidents Lord Charles would have had another year’s command of the Fleet instead of being put upon the beach. It was well for them that men like Lord Charles Beresford, who worked for the sake of an idea, desired no better payment than to see their ideas carried into action. That was perhaps one of the great differences between labour as it was understood by one party in the House and mere work. (Laughter.) England owed to Lord Charles Beresford’s courage, insistence, and foresight the passing of the Naval Defence Act, 1889–1893, which gave us those ships and the breathing time which the possession of those ships carried with it. Looking back, one saw by the light of later events how vital and far-reaching were the effects of that Defence Act; but quite as important as the ships was Lord Charles’s demand made about the same time for the creation of a General Staff which should organize in peace for war and all that war implied. The need for that staff was considered great then; it was tenfold greater now.

—The Times, 14 July 1910.