At a Recruiting Meeting, the Dome, Brighton

7 September 1914

The outbreak of war in early August meant that all of the political rancor built up over Liberal measures and Home Rule agitation over the past nine years was instantly overwhelmed: “All the interests of our life of six weeks ago are dead.” The note that Kipling strikes in this early response to the war remains essentially the same to the end in all that he had to say in those years, though it grows more shrill under the unyielding pressure of loss and weariness.

THROUGH NO FAULT nor wish of ours, we are at war with Germany, the Power which owes its existence to three well-thought-out wars: the Power which for the last twenty years has devoted itself to organising and preparing for this war; the Power which is now fighting to conquer the civilised world. For the last two generations, the Germans, in their books, lectures, speeches, and schools, have been carefully taught that nothing less than this world conquest was the object of their preparation, and their sacrifices. They have prepared carefully and sacrificed greatly. They have also never concealed that when this war came it would be carried through without regard for moral and international rights, and that it would be waged with the utmost rigour on all civil and non-combatant populations. This they made clear in times of peace; now war has come and we see that in this respect they keep their word, for they have disregarded their most solemn treaty obligations—(hear, hear)—they have set aside all laws of international warfare; they have deliberately, and as a matter of policy, filled the earth with horror and hate. We have only to look across to Belgium to realise the minimum of what we may expect here. It is intended that we shall be made to realise these horrors in order that they may break our nerve and weaken our hearts for the struggle. This I believe to be a miscalculation. (Cheers.)

Therefore there can be no question of the supreme need for every man capable of bearing arms in these islands to join the Army. There is no other duty except this for any fit man. The value and significance of everything else has been emptied out of our lives. Recruits, we are told, are coming in at the rate of between 20,000 and 30,000 a day; but large as these numbers may seem, they are but a beginning. We must have men, and men, and men, if we with our Allies are to check the onrush of organised barbarism. Have no
illusion. We are dealing with a strong and magnificently-equipped enemy, whose avowed aim is our complete destruction. The violation of Belgium, the attack on France, the defence against Russia are only steps by the way. Germany’s real objective, as she has always told us, is England—England’s wealth, trade, and world-wide possessions. If you assume for an instant that that attack will be successful England will not be reduced, as some people say, to the rank of a second-rate power: we shall cease to exist as a nation, we shall become an outlying province of Germany, to be administered with what severity German safety and interests require. Again, we have only to look across the narrow seas for proof of this. Neither in Belgium nor in France does a man’s rank or class secure him exemption or pity from the enemy: there is one fate for all. We arm against such a fate. (Cheers.) There is one work for us all. We enter into a new life in which all the facts of war that we had put behind or forgotten for the past hundred years have returned to confront and test us, as they tested our fathers. Our Army in France has suffered losses heavier than any British Army has ever known in battles, compared with which the greatest battles of history were mere skirmishes. Already we are linked together by common pride in their achievements and endurance, and by common resolve that through our endurance we shall restore a fearless and honourable peace to mankind. (Cheers.)

It will be a long and a hard road, beset with difficulties and discouragements; but we tread it together, and we will tread it together to the end. (Cheers.) Our petty social divisions and barriers have been swept away at the outset of our mighty struggle. All the interests of our life of six weeks ago are dead. We have but one interest now, and that touches the naked heart of every man in this island and the Empire. (Cheers.) Each long day, each rush of men to our self-conscripted armies, and every new burden laid upon the country, binds us yet closer in a brotherhood of service and sacrifice. No man can stand outside that brotherhood. If we are to win the right for ourselves and for freedom to exist on earth every man must offer himself for that service and that sacrifice, while the State sees to it that his dependents do not suffer. (Hear, hear.) There is no middle way. In this war we do not doubt our ultimate victory, any more than we doubt the justice of our cause. It is not conceivable that we should fail, for if we fail the lights of freedom go out over the whole world. They may glimmer for a little in the Western Hemisphere, but a Germany dominating half the world by sea and land will most certainly extinguish them in every quarter where they have hitherto shone upon mankind, so that even the very tradition of freedom will pass out of remembrance. If we do our duty we shall not fail. (Loud cheers.)

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