ENGLAND
AND THE
ENGLISH
BY
RUDYARD KIPLING

Chairman,
FESTIVAL DINNER, THE ROYAL
SOCIETY OF ST. GEORGE,
23 April, 1920.
Connaught Rooms, London.

Price Sixpence.

Published by the Society by permission of Mr. Rudyard Kipling.
[COPYRIGHT.]
"ENGLAND."

Speech by RUDYARD KIPLING
(Chairman.)

MY LORDS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.—I think this is an occasion on which it behoves us all to walk rather circumspectly. If you will let me, I will try and tell you why. About sixteen hundred years ago, when Rome was mistress of the world and the Picts and the Scots lived on the other side of the wall that ran from Newcastle to Carlisle, the story goes that Rome allowed all those peoples one night in the year in which they could say aloud exactly what they thought of Rome, without fear of the consequences; so then, on that one night of the year, they would creep out of the heather in droves and light their little wandering fires and criticise the Libyan Generals and their Roman Pontiffs and the Eastern camp followers, who looked down on them from the top of the great high unbreakable Roman wall sixteen hundred years ago.

To-day, Imperial Rome is dead. The wall is down and the Picts and the Scots are on this side of it, but thanks to our Royal Society of St. George, there still remains one night in the year when the English can creep out of their hiding-places and whisper to each other exactly what we think about ourselves. No, it is not quite safe to criticise our masters—our masters who tax us and educate us, and try us, and minister so abundantly to what they instruct us our wants ought to be. Since these masters of ours have not yet quite the old untroubled assurance of power and knowledge that made Rome so tolerant in the days when the Picts and the Scots lived on the other side of the wall, we will confine ourselves to our own popular and widely recognized defects.

Some of our severest critics, who, of course, are of our own household, have said that there never was such a thing as the English Race—that it is at best the intolerably insolent outcome of ancient invasions and immigrations, freshened with more recent Continental gaol-deliveries. Far be it from me to traverse such statements. I give them on no less authority than that of the late Mr. Daniel Defoe, Liveryman of the City of London, author of "Robinson Crusoe" and of a pamphlet called "The True-born Englishman." He deals very faithfully with the English, so faithfully that in deference to the susceptibilities of some races, I will not give his version of the Englishman's pedigree,
but in his summing up of the true-born Englishman, Defoe says:

"A true-born Englishman's a contradiction,
In speech, in irony, in fact a fiction,
A metaphor intended to express
A man akin to all the Universe."

In that last line it seems to me that Defoe slips into a blessing where he meant to curse, because a man "akin to all the Universe" cannot be wholly lost. He must have some points of contact with humanity, and the Englishman has had several.

The Phoenicians taught him the rudiments of shopkeeping; the Romans taught him love of sport by hiring him to fight wild beasts in their arenas. Under the Heptarchy he studied Social Reform, which in those unenlightened days consisted of raising levies on capital in order to buy off the Heathen of the North from taking direct action against English industries. He next took a three-hundred-years' course of colloquial and law French under eminent Norman teachers; he did not learn the language then or since, but it left him with a profound respect, based on experience, for his neighbours across the Channel, and a conviction, which time has deepened, that they were the only other people in the world that mattered.

For five hundred years his affairs, domestic and foreign, were controlled by French, Italians, Spanish, with occasional Austrian, politico-ecclesiastical authorities, who tried to teach him that "this realm of England" was but part of a vast international organisation destined to embrace, protect and instruct all mankind. He escaped from those embraces only to find himself subjected to the full rigours of the Puritan Conscience, which at that time was largely directed by gentlemen from Geneva, Leyden, Amsterdam and the Low Countries. While thus engaged he was, under pretext of union, finally and fatally subjugated by the Scot. A few years later he embarked on the swelling tide of party politics in all their attendant purity, since which he has seldom been allowed to look back and never forward.

I submit that such a nightmare of national experience would have driven an unmixed race to the edge of lunacy, but the Englishman is like a built-up gun barrel, all one temper though welded of many different materials, and he has strong powers of resistance. Roman, Dane, Norman, Papist, Cromwellian, Stuart, Hollander, Hanoverian, Upper Class, Middle Class, Democracy, each in turn through a thousand years experimented on him and tried to make him to their own liking. He met them each in turn with a large silent toleration, which each in turn mistook for native
stupidity. He gave them each in turn a fair trial and, when he had finished with them, an equally fair dismissal. As an additional safeguard he devised for himself a social system in watertight compartments, so arranged that neither the water of popular emotion nor the fires of private revenge could sweep his ship of State from end to end. If, in spite of this, the domestic situation became too much for him he could always take a ship and go to sea, and there seek or impose the peace which the Papal Legate, or Mediaeval Trade Union, or profligate Chancellor of the Exchequer denied to him at home. And thus, gentlemen, not in a fit of absence of mind, was the Empire born. It was the outcome of the relaxation of persecuted specialists—men who for one cause or another were unfit for the rough and tumble of life at home. They did it for change and rest, exactly as we used to take our summer holidays, and like ourselves they took their national habits with them. For example, they did not often gather together with harps and rebecks to celebrate their national glories, or to hymn their national heroes. When they did not take them both for granted, they, like ourselves, generally denied the one and did their best to impeach the other. But, by some mysterious rule-of-thumb magic, they did establish and maintain reasonable security and peace among simple folk in very many parts of the world, and that, too, without overmuch murder, robbery, oppression or torture.

One secret of the success of the English was perhaps their imperturbable tolerance. A race that has been persecuted, or—what comes to the same thing—bored, by every persecuted refugee to whom they have ever given an asylum, naturally learns to tolerate anything. Their immensely mixed origin, too, made the English in a very real sense akin to all the universe, and sympathetic in their dumb way with remote gods and strange people. Above all, their long insular experience of imported brainstorms had taught them that men should not try to do better than good for fear lest worse than bad might follow. And there has been enough of worse than bad in the world for the last few years. Our national weakness for keeping to the easiest road to the latest possible minute sooner than inconvenience ourselves or our neighbours has been visited upon us full tale. After ninety-nine years of peace the English were given ninety-six hours in which to choose whether they would buy a little longer peace from the heathen in the North, as some of their ancestors had done, or whether they would make peace with them as our King Alfred made it with the Danes. It was a race that had almost forgotten how to say "No" to anybody who said "Yes" in a sufficiently loud voice. It seemed as if it had quite forgotten that it had broken a Church, killed a
King, closed a Protectorate and exiled another King, sooner than be driven where it did not want to go. But when its hour came, once again it decided to go its own way, and once again by instinct, for it had prepared nothing, it had foreseen nothing. It had been assured that not only was there no need for preparation against war, but that the mere thought of preparation against war was absurd where it was not criminal. Therefore, through the first two years of the war, it was necessary to throw up a barricade of the dead bodies of the nation’s youth behind which the most elementary preparations could be begun. There has been no such slaughter of the English in English history, but the actual war was no more than a large-scale repetition of previous national experiences. If an Elizabethan Statesman (or adventurer) could have returned to England during the war he would, I think, in a very short time have been able to pick up his office work almost where he dropped it. His reports and his maps would have been a little more detailed, but he would have been surprisingly abreast of the whole situation.

Where the old English influence had struck deep all the world over he would have seen help and comfort hurried up to all the fronts from all the world over without count or tale, without word or bond to limit or confirm it. Where the old alien influences that he knew so well had persisted, or where the new influences directed by the old were at work, he would have seen, as he expected, all help for the war denied, withheld, or doled out grudgingly, piecemeal at a high price. He would have recognised that what held firm in the days of the Armada held firm at Armageddon, that what had broken beneath his hand then was rotten in our hand now. Bar a few minor differences of equipment he would have felt just like any sailor or soldier returning to some bitterly familiar job of sea-patrol or trench life between ’14 and ’18. Like those men he would have taken for granted a great deal upon which other nations might have wasted valuable thought and attention. Our stories of Colonel and Zeebrugge, of the English county battalions not one year old that died to the last man as a matter of routine on the fronts that they were ordered to hold, would have moved him no more and no less than the little affair of Sir Richard Grenville off Flores, in the "Revenge." That troopers of County Yeomanry in Mesopotamia, picked almost at random, could, single handed and by sheer force of character, control and conciliate in a few days a turbulent Arab village, would have amazed him no more and no less than any tale of Panama, or of our first venture across the world, told him by Sir Francis Drake or any forgotten captain of the same age. Being of the breed he would have known the breed and would have taken the work of the breed for granted.
And herein, as I see it, lies the strength of the English—that they have behind them this continuity of immensely varied race-experience and race-memory, running equally through all classes back to the very dawn of our dawn, which imposes on them unconsciously, even while they deny or deride it, standards of achievement and comparison, hard perhaps, and perhaps a little unsympathetic, but not low—not low, and, as all earth is witness, not easily to be lowered. And that is the reason why in things nearest our hearts we praise so little and criticise so lavishly. It is the only compliment an Englishman dare pay to his country.

As you know, our standards of achievement and comparison do not appear on the surface, nor are they much in men's mouths. When they are, they are mostly translated into terms of sport or the slang of our various games, but whenever the English deal in earnest with each other, or with the outside world, those standards are taken for granted, and it is by the things that we take for granted without word that we live. It was taken for granted during the war that every day was St. George's Day, on one or other of our fronts.

And now we and our kin, after these great years, are sick, dizzy and shaken—like all convalescents, a little inclined to pity ourselves, a little inclined to stay as long as possible on a diet of invalid slops, and a little more than inclined to mistake the hysteria of convalescence for the symptoms of returning life and thought. Here also instinct tells us that the weight, the range, and the evenly-spread richness of our national past should ballast us sufficiently to navigate through whatever storms—or brainstorms—there may be ahead. And we are threatened with several.

One school of thought, Muscovite in origin, holds, as the Danes held twelve hundred years ago, that rapine and scientific torture will elevate our ideals, which up to the present have merely taught us to try to do our duty to our God and our neighbour. Others are content to work for the organised bankruptcy of whatsoever is of good repute, including the systematic betrayal of our friends very much on the same lines as some people used to panic after every crusade and every visitation of the plague. We are further promised an unparalleled outbreak of education, guaranteed to produce a standardised State-aided mind. The Church evolved almost a parallel system in the Middle Ages, which, much to her surprise, produced the Revolution.

Lastly, lest we should ever again lapse into our "pathetic contentment," the breed which organised at a week's notice to achieve the impossible and achieved it—by earth, sea and air achieved it—is now, as a reward, to be ruthlessly
reorganised in every detail of its life, walk and conduct. That great work was begun by William the Conquerer, Anno Domini 1066, and has been before Committee or Commission ever since.

Norman, Papist, Cromwellian, Stuart, Hollander, Hanoverian, Upper Class, Middle Class, Democracy, have each in turn tried their fleeting hand on the "man akin to all the Universe." From each in turn he has taken what he wanted, to each in turn he has given a fair trial and, when he has quite finished, an equally fair dismissal.

What will he do in the future? We are too near to the dust of the main battle to see clearly. We know that England is crippled by the loss and wastage of a whole generation, and that her position, from the civil point of view to-day, is the position of our armies in the darkest days of the war. That is to say, all leave is stopped for any man who can manage to stand up to his job, no matter how sick or stale he may feel himself to be, and there is undreamed-of promotion for untried men who, simply because they are not dead, will now have to face heavier responsibility, longer hours, and criticism that certainly will not grow milder as the years pass, but no miracles have occurred.

This world of ours, which some of us in their zeal to do better than good have helped to create, but which we must all inherit, is not a new world, but the old world grown harder. The wheel has come full circle. The whole weight of the world at the present moment lies again as it used to lie in the time of our fathers, on the necks of two nations, England and France. The sole force under God's good Providence that can meet this turn of our fate, is not temperament, not opportunism, nor any effort to do better than good, but character and again character, such mere ingrained, common-sense, hand-hammered, loyal strength of character as one humbly dares to hope that fifteen hundred years of equality of experience have given us.

If this hope be true—and because we know the breed in our hearts we know that it is true—if this hope be justified, our children's children, looking back through the luminous years to where we here stumble and falter, will say to themselves: "Was it possible—was it possible that the English of that age did not know, could not see, dared not even guess, to what height of strength, wisdom and enduring honour they had lifted their land?"

But we will be circumspect! My lords, ladies and gentlemen, for what there is of it, for such as it is and for what it may be worth, will you drink to England and the English?
The Royal Society of St. George.

Founded 1894.

Patrons: His Majesty the King.
Her Majesty the Queen.
Her Majesty Queen Alexandra.

President: His Royal Highness, The Prince of Wales.


The Royal Society of St. George has been established to encourage and strengthen the spirit of patriotism amongst all classes of the English people, and to foster and inspire our fellow-countrymen with a jealous pride in all that concerns the welfare and greatness of their native land, or the land of their fathers.

The Society and its branches throughout the world, with a Membership exceeding 20,000, is open to all Englishmen and Englishwomen (or their issue), irrespective of creed or party, being British subjects.

All work in connexion with The Royal Society of St. George is honorary.

For further particulars address

Howard Ruff,
Founder and Hon. Secretary,
5 Bloomsbury Square, London, W.C.1.
How many could with Comenius truthfully say:—

I do love
My Country's good, with a respect more tender,
More holy and profound, than mine own life."

The Royal Society of St. George.

Founded 1894.

President — His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales

To The Hon. Secretary,
5, Bloomsbury Square, W.C.1

I am desirous of becoming a __________________________ of The Royal Society of St. George,

to which the Annual Subscription (or donative qualification) is ________________________________

LIFE GOVERNOR's Qualification not less than £10 10s. conferring Life Membership (£15 15s. including Life Ticket for Festival Dinner)

LIFE MEMBER, £5 5s.
FELLOW'S Subscription £1 1s. (which includes, upon application, a Ticket for the Festival Dinner).
MEMBER, 10/6
ASSOCIATE MEMBER, 5/-
JUNIOR ASSOCIATE MEMBER, 2/6
OVER-SEAS ASSOCIATE MEMBER, 5/-

Name _______________________________________________________
Address ____________________________________________________

Date ______________________________________________________

All Subscriptions fall due 1st January.
The Subscriptions of Members (in any grade) elected after St. George's Day cover the year following.

"The English Race" is posted free to Members of every grade.