

JOHN GALSWORTHY'S "A SHEAF"*

To all interested in the personality of John Galsworthy his new book affords a revelation of the man himself. To this man of sensitive and vivid imagination, all injustice and cruelty become the suffering of his own soul. *A Sheaf* is a compilation of various published and unpublished papers and essays. The book is divided into two parts, and might be termed a volume of humane protests and warnings. The first is a collection of protests against stupid national cruelties and injustices to humans and animals. The various essays are directed against the caging of wild birds, the vivisection of dogs, needless cruelty in the slaughter of animals for food, and the socially destructive policy of solitary confinement in prisons. Among other papers there is an interesting unpublished preface to his play *Justice*. "Gentles Let Us Rest," a paper written to *The Nation* in 1910, is a plea for immediately granting the vote to women on the ground that to withhold it longer is socially inexpedient. The first half of the book closes with, "The Will to Peace," which relates Galsworthy's reaction, just previous to the war, on reading a poster entitled, "Why England and Germany Must Go to War." In view of the ensuing cataclysm, Galsworthy's determined faith at that moment that the calamity could not eventuate is tragic.

The second half of the book was written after the war and has two psychological divisions. One group of essays

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might be gathered under the head of "First Reactions to the War." The latter portion Mr. Galsworthy himself entitles "Second Thoughts on the War." He opens the division on the war with a "Credo," setting forth his faith that the present war is a struggle between democracy and the powers of autocracy. He believes that, "It is the device of executive power from popular sanction that has made possible this greatest of all disasters in history," and that it is for the extension of more democratic control that England and the Allies are fighting. He maintains that democracy's tide sets from the West to the East and grants that it must permeate Germany before it reaches Russia. He welcomes Russia's aid because he feels that if France and England are beaten it will be the death of democracy, yet he does not do as so many pro-Allies are prone to in the passion of the moment, utterly blink at the irony of England's alliance with Russia under the banner of sovereignty for the people.

Even if one questions Galsworthy's interpretation of the social forces arrayed in this struggle, one cannot read *A Sheaf* without granting utter sincerity to this beauty and liberty loving soul so harrowed by the horror of the hour. The poignancy of mental agony revealed in these pages might in very self-defense necessitate endowing the cause of so much suffering with ultimate potentialities for world progress. And in justice it should be emphasised that it is world progress, not merely national progress that Galsworthy longs for. There is no hatred in his heart against any peoples. There is only a desire to abolish evil autocratic systems which he believes to have been responsible for this war. He has no tolerance for those who write of the glories of war. He terms this war, "the grand defeat of all Utopians, dreamers, poets, philosophers, idealists, humanitarians, lovers of peace and the arts; bag and baggage they are thrown out of a world that for the time has no use for them." One senses how utterly lone and outside the world Gals-

worthy himself felt when many of these pages were wrung from his heart.

Despite his firm faith in the idealism of England's and the Allies' part in this war he is never a national jingoist. He is a poet, a careful social thinker with a heart hunger for beauty and the balanced social harmony of justice for the least as well as the greatest of the dwellers on earth. Like the tragic and incessant warning of the lonely bell-buoy at sea, there resurges throughout the "Second Thoughts on the War," a knell of warning to his own country arising out of a desperate and terrible soul questioning. Again and again in the prose of pure gold that issues from a burning heart he warns the Britain he loves devotedly, but not blindly, to beware the temptations that will befall them when it comes to peace making and during the bitterly cruel years of reconstruction that must follow. He says:

If the fine phrases we have used and are still using about liberty, humanity, democracy, and peace are not genuinely felt they will come home to roost most vilely. By the outside world we shall be judged according to the measure of actuality we give hereafter to the claim we now make of being champions of freedom and humanity; and only according to our inward habit of thought during the war shall we be able to act when it is over. We can *do* nothing now perhaps save prosecute the fight to its appointed end; but if we are not to turn out fraudulent after the event it is already time to feel ahead. . . . A sloppy optimism is not the slightest good, no more than a deliberate pessimism. "It will be all right after the war"! is, no doubt, the attitude of many minds just now. It will only be all right after the war if with all the might of a sustained national will we take care that it is.

This warning is reiterated again and again through the latter pages of this book, now in the form of a flaming plea, again with that bitter irony of which Galsworthy is a master. He tells Britain that by its claims in regard to en-

tering this war the national attitude has been fixed and the right of coercion abrogated. He does not gloss over the imperial past, but demands that Britain's pledge to the world shall be kept by "the most rigid scrutiny of its own conduct, and by developing the feeling that it is beneath imperial dignity to wrest material benefit from the losses of others." He admonishes England that after the war there will develop foes within more difficult of conquest than those without are now. A far-seeing social and economic reconstruction and the immediate abolition of the long overdue injustice toward Ireland and Women are a part of the programme he demands.

Galsworthy enduring the pain of the present is projecting his thought toward the future. Whatever one's criticism of his social economy, wherever one's sympathies may lie in this war, all must be grateful for the exceptional minds abiding in warring countries, surrounded by every incentive to blind prejudice and passionate hatred, that are still striving to see beyond and to lead others toward constructive and generous rebuilding. In the power of these men and women, in the depth and breadth of their vision rests the hope of the world.

Roberta Madison.