

CONSERVING OUR SPIRITUAL RESOURCES

BY MARGARET SHERWOOD

IF there is anything apparent in this great crash of war which, logically perhaps, marks the outcome of decades of triumphant material progress, it is our need of utilizing to the full our intellectual and spiritual resources, lest the race go back to savagery. With the quickened insight that comes through suffering, even when shared afar, we get our bearings as we could not in the comfortable years of peace, and, in our swift march toward utmost practical efficiency, we pause, aghast and bewildered: for the natural outcome of certain forces predominant in modern life, certain theories becoming more and more predominant in modern education, is being set forth with awful clarity. That ideal of recent decades, the entirely efficient human being, with every physical power, and every intellectual power that serves the physical, developed to the uttermost, becomes under certain conditions a terrible creature to contemplate, declares himself the greatest enemy that civilization has to face. The menace of absolute efficiency of the lower man when unaware of scruple and of the higher laws that bind the souls of men, is being set forth in blood and iron, shot and shell. What more complete refutation of the claims of the most progressive contemporary training, with its emphasis on the external, its subordination of the ethical, what graver arraignment of its dangers, could be presented than has come in the action and the stand taken by that great nation in which the modern scientific trend has most nearly culminated, Germany—Germany, with her plans for the world of matter so definitely, minutely, precisely made, so wholly at sea in the world of spirit, rudderless, without guide or compass?

As we contemplate this appalling present, and face the era which is coming to be, it behooves us to see what tendencies in ourselves point toward a similar mistaking of

the great end of existence. Our present passion to break with the past, with all that has not to do with the immediate achievement that we call progress, or with knowledge of physical laws of the universe; our contempt for the profounder kind of intellectual discipline which fashions the souls of men are full of menace. Our American worship of "force," of "nerve," of "push," the disrepute in which finer, more scrupulous and less successful types of character stand among us; the undergraduate scorn meted out in many of our institutions dedicated to higher education upon those whose achievements are intellectual rather than muscular; our impatience of thought and passion for action, are, if we could read them aright, alarming danger signs. More and more the restraints imposed in elder days by religious scruple vanish; we have lost the fear of hell, and have not yet attained the deeper fear that attends the contemplation of the beauty of holiness. What can be done to waken the sense that the real values of life are inner values, that character is in itself achievement? What can be done to reinforce the new ideals of social justice, and to save the strangest power now urging on social justice, labor agitation, from a conception of the great issues of life as merely material issues, from methods of force more selfish than those of the old order? What can be done to disturb this absorption of the young in passing things, to check the passion for constant amusement, to rouse them to a sense of the deeper human need?

It is time for us to stop to scrutinize carefully those educational ideals which have, of recent years, been impressed upon us as the most important. There are depths in human nature with which the most progressive theories regarding human development have not reckoned; the young need, both at home and in the schools, a profounder teaching than they are at present getting of the ends and aims of life. Those who are urging the external studies of physical phenomena and physical law to the utmost limit, impatient of the moral and spiritual discipline of an earlier day, forget that their own training gave them a sense of moral values which they make no attempt to hand on in the system they are working out. It would be well for us to stop to think of the consequences involved in a facile change from a culture predominantly ethical to a culture predominantly scientific. Right standards of action do not persist automatically; con-

CONSERVING OUR SPIRITUAL RESOURCES 883

stant will, endeavor, faith, persistent teaching alone can keep alive in the young those high ideals of conduct without which no nation can really live and grow. In the teaching offered the young at home and in school there is lack of that which feeds the most deeply vital force within them. If the future is to be saved, education must be a more fundamental thing than it is, for the most part, at present in this country, must take hold of the deeper elements in human nature, human feeling, passion, sympathy, pity, hope, aspiration; of the profounder intellectual and spiritual powers; of that imaginative insight that can pierce the husk to the finer inner meanings, the souls of things. It must be less external, less dominated by single-track intellectualism, less confident that the secrets of life can be found out by diligent use of the senses. It must more clearly recognize that something profounder which eludes the eye, eludes the ear. Our greatest educational problem today, that which most deeply concerns the future, is not how to get before the young the best scientific apparatus, the most marvelous magnifying glasses, but how to make them think below the surface and find idea back of fact; how to make them know the finer standards of thought and feeling wrought out by the race; how to foster the deeper insight, the finer sympathy, the nobler scruple; how to make them aware of the wonder and the beauty of their spiritual inheritance and the profound challenge therein.

Many a gallant soul today is fighting a good fight in behalf of our national resources, for preserving the integrity of forests, saving waterfalls from destruction, keeping for our descendants, for beauty and for use, the physical wealth of our great country; and the good wishes of all disinterested folk go with them: for thousands and hundreds of thousands are aware of the issue where a question of waste or neglect of material resources is involved. But are we making a sufficiently determined fight, in the same spirit, to train and to develop in the young the diviner human powers of feeling, imagination, which represent the larger resources of human nature? Within them lie deeper powers, profounder instincts than are being stirred now, powers that reach to the inmost depths of being. Immense potential resources of faith, of reverence are there; how, in this vast encompassing secularization of life, can we reach them, make them available? This deeper nature of the young is, incom-

parably, the nation's greatest treasure. How can it be conserved, and brought into wise activity? Are we trying hard enough to keep before them the intellectual and spiritual achievements of the race in the past, the possibilities for the future? Are we "conserving" the priceless treasure of mind and of soul, dug out in centuries of past life, under varied conditions and different environments, of the hard stuff of existence?

The best of this spiritual heritage, this abiding witness to the reality of the inner life, to what we have gained over the brute, comes to us, recorded in terms of imperishable beauty, in the great literature of our own and other races; and we should endeavor, with profound sense of the greatness of the issue, and the imperative need of action in view of dissipating and corroding forces, to preserve for the young and to bring within their reach its mental and spiritual riches. Who among us value this great heritage at its true worth? Lethargy in regard to its slipping hold; ignorance of its supreme value as a matter of training and the need of our youth for it; active objection on the part of educators who would stake the whole of life and development upon the external chance, contribute to our neglect. Wise nations try to incorporate in the lives of present and future citizens all great inheritance; can we afford to let slip the insight of prophet, poet, and philosopher of old?

Literature, it will be maintained, should be read individually and at home; there is little need for educators to bestir themselves in the matter. But, here in America, genuine literature is no longer to any extent read; the old habit of knowing something of the best and finest, once prevalent in large sections of the country, has not survived our present progress. We all go back with pleasure to Lamb's theory that a library of old books, with the young turned loose therein, constitutes the best education in literature. This is admirable, granted the library, the leisure, the instinct for the good, and the opportunity to begin in childhood, for this kind of literary training is the matter of a lifetime. The situation here today, in the vast conglomerate of races which we have become, calls for different measures. In the majority of American homes in older days there was a certain literary tradition; it may have been slight, but it kept alive a sense that knowledge is not merely a matter of the seeing of the eyes, the hearing of the ears, of reflection upon sense-

impressions. Shakespeare, *Pilgrim's Progress*, some of the poets, used to stand upon the bookshelves, however narrow, and the poorest home had had at least that book which has stood for centuries between the human race and its swiftly stirring savage instincts, the Bible,—the Bible, lending freedom to the human spirit, breaking the bonds of narrow and cramping material environment; warring against our Occidental tendency to be swallowed up by mere things, bringing us the mystic Oriental sense of communion with the divine,—the Bible, with its expression of longing for holiness, its joy of adoration in psalms, its fierce spiritual questioning in Job, its flaming passion for righteousness in the prophets, and the matchless tenderness of the Gospels. Whatever may be the disputes of dogma or unfaith, all that is greatest in its teaching is unassailed and unassailable: its magnificent assertion of the existence of God and of the human soul in God; its great and simple ethic, that the supreme thing in life is duty and the supreme duty love. What unspeakable pity that question of date or fact of authorship; what greater pity that mere neglect should dim the one important thing—its spiritual import! Its demand, its standard for the human being to measure up to, is still the loftiest that has reached the race. Other Oriental literatures have taught the spiritual unity of the universe; none has added the staggering commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Humanity has no need of further challenge, while it still gropes, trying to understand and obey this. Throughout it all, spiritual beauty is wrought out in terms of visible beauty, swift image, noble phrase, making the profoundest interpretation of the soul of man come home in human ways, to eye and ear; the book of holiness, the book of poetry—its neglect today means devastating loss, loss of an incomparable means of literary training, of high ethical standards, of incitements to holiness; and neglected it is in increasingly many of the homes of old American stock, unknown in the great mass of the new. What can ever take the place of that book of revelation of man's greater nature, in speech whose very beauty is in itself almost a divine revelation?

The earlier maturity of child thought in preceding generations was doubtless largely due to coming into contact with that record of inner experience, provoking question, setting standards, making young readers aware of mysterious depths, of exalted heights—so much of the potential

vastness of human life and experience was there. It wakened powers, set souls a-stirring, early quivering to the greatest music, early aware that only as spiritual struggle is life important or endurable. Where today, in all the carefully manipulated childhood of the schools, can you find anything to match its influence?

Most of the young today know little of poets or of Bible, however well versed they may be in the Sunday newspapers and cheap magazines that make part of the appalling tidal wave of printed matter that insults the initial high intent of print. From illiterate homes of poverty; from illiterate homes of luxury; from illiterate homes of hard-working folk who have little time or thought for mere books, they pour into public school, high school, perhaps even college; the fact remains that a vast number come from homes where the records of the inner life of the race are neglected or utterly unknown. Again and again, college freshmen confess to having read, their life long, nothing save the books required for college entrance; for the instinctive hunger and thirst of the young for knowledge of recorded human experience seems to be vanishing. Naturally they have no background, and are unaware that there are aspects of life which the "movies" cannot present; that appreciation of finer values that comes through knowing the best in the best books is not theirs; and they are strangers to that deeper questioning regarding human life and destiny which great literature inevitably fosters. The prolonged childishness of mind and of mood observable in many of the young today comes, doubtless, partly from over-emphasis on observation work, which, however keen it may make eye and ear, can never foster the necessary inner development; partly from lack of contact with older and greater experience. Is there any other educative power so potent, so full of stimulus, of quickening, as that which comes from being in contact with great ideas, partly understood, not fully grasped, full of challenge, of spur to mind and imagination? Life should hold for childhood and youth no fascination so great as coming into the presence of older and wiser minds, perhaps through hearing grown people talk, though, alas, there are few grown people now! Perhaps through hearing or reading Bible, philosopher, or poet. To understand, in part, the grave themes; to feel the quick shock of challenge through the partly understood; to strive to grow and find out.—it is all

a-knocking, knocking at great doors ajar, leading to great highways of the human soul. How shall ways be found to bring maturing influences to bear upon the young, now when thought in regard to the inner life is so largely swallowed up in bland unconsciousness of the existence of an inner life?

We in America today need a Renaissance, a revival of literature for its own sake, for its large revelation of human life and human experience. We need that kind of intellectual awakening that can come in no way save through an awakened sense of the value of letters, of the wealth of our intellectual and spiritual inheritance from the past. No widely-advertised shelf of selected "best books" can serve our purpose; strange that a nation of grown people should be patient with such childishness! We should bestir ourselves, to do our own wide reading, our own thinking, our own choosing, venturing as far as possible into the recorded experience of other peoples and of other times, lingering long over the self-expression of the inner life of our race, to keep our souls a-quiver and alive; to kindle spiritual aspiration; to rouse ourselves out of narrowness and that complacency to which we are so sadly given—that self-congratulation of ourselves as the most admirable of peoples in the most progressive country at the greatest moment of human achievement. For standards of comparison, sense of values, stimulus, for the broadening and deepening of life, we should know the most exalted thought of other peoples who have walked the earth: Hebrew aspiration, Greek idealism, the finer intuition of India, as well as the nobler interpretations of existence of modern races besides our own. We need to measure ourselves and test our thought and our endeavor, by contact with the deeper experiences of the human soul; we need to learn how to think more profoundly and to feel more acutely, growing more and more sensitive to the play of spiritual forces in life.

As a people we have thought too much, perhaps, of the development of the human soul as wholly a matter of dogma or creed, unaware how many of our gifts, our instincts, may minister to our inner need. Something of the old Puritan narrowness lingers here, the early conviction of stern ancestral folk, eschewing art, akin to their protagonist, Cromwell, who was unable to discern the spiritual idealism in the Gothic beauty he destroyed, an idealism as single-minded as his own, and far lovelier in expression. While dogma, per-

haps narrow dogma, was considered by many the only hold of the soul, with dogma shaken or gone all seems lost. With a sense of being at the end of their spiritual resources, and no perception of the many rainbow breakings of the white light, truth, they turn, in sheer desperation, to mechanical pursuits and material pleasures, not realizing that many an intellectual problem of doubt may minister to higher need, and that companionship with those to whom immaterial values are supremely important ministers to soul.

It is precisely because great literature will at once bring the young into contact with those to whom the great business of life is to find the inner values, and who make manifest the fact that the truth reveals itself in many ways, that it is of paramount importance in an educational system and in the life at home. The young need, not mere precept, but the study of character in action, of individuals in the complex of existence, with the outcome uncertain; need to see, from the dismay and the tangle, the glory of the human will flashing out to conquer; to study human defeat in actual presentation and win a larger understanding. The great meanings of literature should be taught, not dogmatically, but with reverent effort to interpret, to become aware of many kinds of insight into the mysteries of existence, to let life grow great in finding how different thinkers, searchers for the light, struggled, won, or failed. That large reading of human life and experience that shows us growth achieved, perhaps, through failure, doubt, despair, must be ours. While we may not always share the conclusion, we are wiser for sharing the struggle; the aspiration of many an one with whose conviction we should not agree may prove the truest stimulus; all is safe so long as the great issues of life are conceived as spiritual issues. Literature is invaluable for its communication of high idealism apart from dogma, checking our over-easy tendency to discard creeds as worthless or to clutch them as final, being lulled to sleep by them; helping us grow toward that larger understanding which is one of the chief aims of existence.

One would fain make a plea, in behalf of the young of today and of future days, for a revival of that old sense of the sacredness of books, and their cherishing at the fireside; for an attempt to stem this passion for the mechanical, distorted, mangled literature of the "movies"; one would

fain make a plea for a larger and more respected place in our national system of education for the study of our own English literature—devout and untiring study, jealous lest large meanings escape us. We need to find ways to make more available our choicest racial possession, to bring it to bear upon the lives of the many, to find methods of teaching it so profound that they shall be profoundly simple, that all may share, in democratic fashion, the best that our race has wrought. It is a wonderful literature, recording the inner life of a great people, a literature whose native genius has been reinforced by profoundest influences: the intellectual insights of Greece, the practical wisdom of Rome, the clarity of thought and manner of France, the philosophic depth of the earlier Germany. Above all else, breathes through it as its very breath of life, the conception from out of the mystical East of life as spiritual aspiration, matter as the handiwork of spirit. Our whole literature, worked out under this inspiration, is full of divinations of great meanings, a literature thrilled through with tremendous hopes: belief in life immortal, belief in holiness; of struggle toward this faith, rebellion against it.

It is frankly for its civilizing power that we need this study, not for remote questions of scholarship involving intellectual gymnastics. The highest type of literature, the most imaginative, the most idealistic, should be brought to bear directly upon life; the young should know their Carlyle and their Ruskin, their Browning and their Keats, their Shakespeare, Bishop Berkeley and Sir Thomas Browne, as they now know brake and lever, pulley and piston, and the wriggling of the amoeba under the microscope. They should be taught that: "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life." Literature should be taught with much of ethical and spiritual purpose, with more emphasis upon the gist of what is said, the significance, its *raison d'être*, and less upon externals. All husks and outer shows and pedantries of teaching we need to slough off, striving to reveal the quick and vital something at the source. We need to teach the message, the supreme importance of literature as soul revelation, with less of the outer covering, more of the divine intent, that the young may be made to feel the impact of the intellectual and spiritual past experience of the race as expressed in terms of beauty.

For the enlargement and the deepening of life each great period of our literature contains great treasure; in each we find certain standards of thought and of feeling that may well serve as a pattern and a challenge, rousing dissatisfaction with our complacent present. It is not well for the race to forget any fineness of insight once achieved, if but by a single individual, writing in loneliness in a moment of divination; much less any great idea or ideal which has swayed masses of mankind.

Of our English literature of the Renaissance and the need of our young to know it, it is difficult to speak in measured terms; impossible, perhaps, to enumerate all its great qualities: the passionate idealism; the sheer joy of mental endeavor; the sense of life as intellectual and spiritual adventure. Lyric, drama, and treatise are thrilled through with the glory of creative activity in realms of mind. Here we find wisdom greater than our own, for the Elizabethans, in shaping their new world, kept the old, honoring classic achievement, eager to save all that they might of earlier attainment to help in their own, and the unsurpassed greatness of their output owes a great debt to this attitude. Their lofty humanism rebukes our modern lack of balance. The scholars, with their reverent quest into old and sacred places; Bacon, with his keen delight in thought, may help our blindness; and we should do well to ponder more deeply our Shakespeare, with his unrivalled insight into life, life apprehended not as mere mechanical play of physical and material forces, but life as struggle, a spiritual glory, perhaps despair,—at least conceived in terms of soul. Of Marlowe's agony and passion, his *Faust*, with its anguish, its thrill of remorse, its profound sense of values in that vision of heaven lost and hell attained; of Sidney's great idealistic conception of the supreme uses of poetry; of Spenser's inability to read life as anything but spiritual quest, there is small counterpart today. Surely in our perfect mechanical equipment, and our satisfaction with the externals of life, it is well for us to remember the spiritual and intellectual breezes a-blowing long ago.

That glorious outburst of English poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is so near to us that its searchings, its questions, its answers, are our own. It stands out, as does the poetry of the sixteenth century, as one of the great moments in human development, full of

CONSERVING OUR SPIRITUAL RESOURCES 891

passion, faith, insight, imaginative divination of the great meanings of life. Blake's rending the veil of matter to burning spirit; Wordsworth's penetration to the soul of nature; Shelley's ardent quest of the perfect, are but part of the great spiritual uplift, as is Keats's resolute attempt to create his world of the ideal, to search out the utmost ways of beauty as a refuge for the human spirit in that troubled time. These were great souls, of lofty passion, aware of profoundest issues, of ends other than apparent; so ardent in questioning, so sensitive to problems that still are our own, so gifted in expressing them, that their poetry seemed to prelude a great era of imaginative vision and idealistic achievement; but, alas! the spinning jenny was invented in this same period, and the spinning jenny got ahead.

We cannot do without that which our forefathers have wrought; for the great soul-adventure, life, needs constant contact with other soul-adventures, constant rousing, stimulus, companionship by the way with those whose pace is braver and better than our own. There is no safety in any rut of comfortable thought or habit, far less any security in clinging fast to the material possessions held in one's hand. We go from mystery to mystery, and have need to listen to the voices which tell us what others have found out. In a statistics-ridden world of increasing surface information and increasing inner uncertainties, we must know the assurances upon which great souls have greatly built, the deeper strivings of the race. Our task is to find out the highest thought and aspiration and live in it; to breathe the best of the old hopes and make them come true; to draw near the quick and vital experiences of the human soul and share its profounder life as it has been handed on. We can spare none of the spiritual attainment of the past; our instant necessity is to know all that humanity, of whatsoever race, has discovered of the divine, of hope for mankind, consolation for mankind, aspiration that may quicken ours. The coolly amused analyses of life in the literature of the present day and recent decades is insufficient for our need. Most of contemporary writing does not meet the highest uses of literature in stimulus, incitement to mind and soul. The cumulative hope, the cumulative aspiration of all earlier days is not too much; we have therein vested rights, entailed long ago, and it should be our deepest concern to keep and

add. We of today are responsible for the high insights of the past.

The very association with those who lived, and, through their nobly created work, forever live for us in a world of spiritual and intellectual endeavor, has an incalculable effect. Something must be granted us to guide in our human incompleteness; something to help in the next step and the next, in a refining of judgment, a suggestion of standards that have been part of the race-achievement;—for such scruples as we have developed in the face of this long struggle for existence we cannot afford to lose, lest the struggle from the brute have to be done all over again; something to make us wise in the matter of human limitations and mistakes, rousing that sympathy which is a great part of all genuine spiritual attainment. We cannot afford to lose any interpretation of human sorrow, suffering, sin, nobly expressed, wakening our deeper understanding. Here, life is shared with earth's greatest; we live through lives with others of higher stature than ourselves, sharing lyric aspiration or tragic struggle, and through the very humanness of such contact, our lives grow great.

Few can fail to see that the human race is in need of deeper sustenance than the most advanced thought of our time can offer. The dominant intellectualism of the last century is inadequate either to stimulate or to console; the profoundest needs of humanity are not here met. The reasons are not far to seek. Of the two great instincts forever at work in human growth: curiosity, the desire to discover, to find new mental boundaries; and reverence, the power to hold fast to the best that has been found out, made precious through human struggle—surely for many decades the former has been in the ascendant. More specifically, through the increasing passion to find out the secrets of the world of matter, something of the nice equilibrium that means perfect development has been lost; and the tendency to conserve, to keep that which has been achieved has been in abeyance. The trust in the new and startling, the ready exchange, for the latest scrap of knowledge, of that which is far deeper than knowledge is not the mark of a wise people. As, in the material world, where men acquire and heap up wealth but to waste it in great wars and elsewhere, so in the world intellectual, for the curiosity of mankind far outstrips the power to keep and utilize to the last shade of

CONSERVING OUR SPIRITUAL RESOURCES 893

meaning the inner experience of the race. Alas for the great squandering! One would think that the deepest human endeavor would go into holding fast resolutely to the highest that has been attained, that it might ever touch the will to intenser effort. Who can interpret this enduring irony of the spiritual life, the great difficulty of keeping the fruits of victory already gained, the necessity of fighting the fight over and over again?

For check upon our present exultant materialism, for revelation of the world of beauty, for spiritual insight, for refusal to accept the lesser explanations of existence, the great literature of earlier days must be made known and cherished, lest we go backward, forgetting the finest and highest moments of human experience, moments of insight into the heart of the mystery of things, moments of spiritual struggle, when, through high endeavor of the individual, something was won for the race. We must not lose any high standards dreamed, divined, achieved in the past, of courage, of courtesy, of fair play, of holiness. All that will enkindle the mind of youth to finer and higher aspiration should be kept constantly before them, for many and many an aspect of the great past will enlarge the present and secure the future. A race cannot too vigilantly guard that which has been its profoundest manifestation of inner life: old insights, old ideals made secure for all time in beauty of expression—our country will indeed be poorer for all time if it ignores, neglects, rides over at break-neck pace its chiefest treasure. The austerity, the height of ideals therein expressed, the resolute turning away from all shows and mere outer appearance to the souls of things—America, our America that has forgotten or never known has need to remember. Now is the time to do battle in the name of the spirit, with every possible weapon that can be put into the hands of the young, for the lost provinces of the soul, our *anima irridenta*.

MARGARET SHERWOOD.

THE MAD PHILOSOPHER

CALE YOUNG RICE

They let him wander as he will
By wood and river, vale and hill,
Though snapped by madness are the strings
Of his wan mind's imaginings.

And often his sad spirit's breath
Will chant of life and love and death,
Twanging upon the broken ends
Of strings that some chance moment mends.

"The harlot moon still clings to earth,"
He croons, "the love's of little worth.
Cold as the spirit of a star
Her lips and eyes and bosom are. . . ."

"Within some sky beyond the sky
There is a whisper Why, Why, Why?
If I could climb the wind to it,
Of frenzy earth should soon be quit. . . ."

"A person lives that men call God.
I caught him once within a clod.
He is not really God at all,
But only atoms that can crawl. . . ."

"Hey diddle, many sorrows be
Within the womb of destiny.
That's why the thrush will chant all day—
To keep from hearing men who pray. . . ."

"The sweet sweet herb of happiness
Grows ever less and less and less.
I'm sure it is because men look
At their own image in the brook. . . ."