

The Preceptor

By John Galsworthy.

HE had a philosophy as yet untouched. His stars were the old stars, his faith the old faith; nor would he recognize that there was any other, for, not to recognize any point of view except his own was no doubt the very essence of his faith. Wisdom! There was surely none save the flinging of the door to, standing with your back against that door, and telling people what was behind it. For though he could not know what was behind, he thought it low to say so. An "atheist," as he termed certain persons, was to him beneath contempt, an "agnostic," as he termed certain others, a poor and foolish creature. As for a rationalist, positivist, pragmatist, or any other "ist"—well, that was just what they were. He made no secret of the fact that he simply could not understand people like that. It was true. "What can they do—save deny?" he would say: "What do they contribute to the morals and the elevation of the world? What have they got, to make up for what is behind that door? Where are their symbols? How shall they move and lead the people? No," he said, "a little child shall lead the people, and I am the little child! For I can spin them a tale, such as children love, of what is behind that door." Such was the temper of his mind, that he never flinched from believing true what he thought would benefit himself and others.

For example, he held a crown of ultimate advantage to be necessary to pure and stable living. If one could not say: "Listen, children! there it is, behind the door! Look at it, shining, golden—yours! Not now but when you die, if you are good. Be good, therefore! For if you are not good—no crown!" If one could not say that—what could one say? What inducement hold out? And he would describe the crown! There was nothing he detested more than commercialism. And to anyone who ventured to suggest that there was something rather commercial about the idea of that crown, he would retort with asperity. A mere creed that good must be done, so to speak, just out of a present love of dignity and beauty—as a

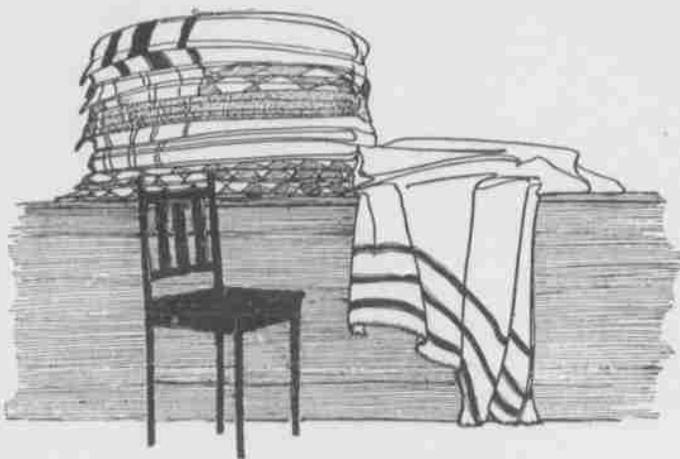
man, seeing something he admired, might work to reproduce it, knowing that he would never achieve it perfectly, but going on until he dropped, out of sheer love of going on—he thought vague, futile, devoid of glamour and contrary to human nature, for he always judged people by himself, and felt that no one could like to go on unless they knew that they would get something if they did. To promise victory, therefore, was most important. Forlorn hopes, setting your teeth, back to the wall, and all that, was bleak and wintry doctrine, without inspiration in it, because it led to nothing. And he abominated those others, who, not presuming to believe in anything, went on, because—as they said—to give up would be to lose their honor. This seemed to him most unpoetic, as well as the very negation of faith; and faith was, as has been said, the main spring of his philosophy.

Once, indeed, in the unguarded moment of a heated argument, he had confessed that some day men might not require to use the symbols of religion which they used now. It was at once pointed out to him that if he thought that, he could not believe these symbols to be true for all time; and if they were not true for all time, why did he say they were? He was dreadfully upset. Deferring answer, however, for the moment, he was soon able to retort that the symbols were true—*ah—hysterically*. If a man—and this was the point—did not stand by these symbols, by which could he stand? Tell him that! Symbols were necessary. But what symbols were there in a mere Good Will; a mere vague following of one's own dignity and honor, out of a formless love of Life? How put up a religion of such amorphous and unrewarded chivalry and devotion, how put up a blind love of Mystery, in place of a religion of definite crowns and punishments, how substitute a love of mere abstract Goodness, or Beauty, for love of what could be called by Christian names? Human nature being what it is was—it would not do, it absolutely would not do. Though he was fond of the words Mystery, Mystical, he had emphatically no use for them when they were vaguely used by people to express their perpetual (and quite unmoral) reverence for the feeling that they

would never find out the secret of their own existence, never even understand the nature of the Universe or God. Mystery of all that kind seemed to him very pagan, almost Nature-worship, having no finality. And if confronted by someone who said that a Mystery, if it could be understood would naturally not be a Mystery, he would raise his eyebrows. It was that kind of loose, specious, sentimental talk that did so much harm, and drew people away from right understanding of that Great Mystery which, if it was not understood and properly explained, was, for all practical purposes, not a Great Mystery at all. No, it had all been gone into long ago and he stood by the explanations and intended that everyone else should, for in that way alone men are saved; and though he well knew (for he was no Jesuit) that the end did not justify the means, yet in a matter of such all-importance one stopped to consider neither means nor ends—one just saved people. And as for truth—the question of that did not arise, if one believed. What one believed, what one was told to believe, was the truth; and it was no good telling him that the whole range of a man's feeling and reasoning powers must be exercised to ascertain Truth, and that, when ascertained, it would only be relative Truth, and the best available to that particular man. Nothing short of the absolute truth would he put up with, and that guaranteed fixed and immovable, or it was no good for his purpose. To anyone who threw out doubts here and doubts there, and even worse than doubts he had long formed the habit of saying simply, with a smile that he tried hard to make indulgent: "Of course, if you believe that!"

But he very seldom had to argue on these matters, because people, looking at his face with its upright bone formation, rather bushy eyebrows, and eyes with a good deal of light in them, felt that it would be simpler not. He seemed to them to know his own mind almost too well. Joined to this potent faculty of implanting in men a child-like trustfulness in what he told them was behind the door, he had a still more potent faculty of knowing exactly what was good for them in everyday life. The secret of this power was sim-

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