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"Thank You, Stephen Leacock"

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Thank You, Stephen Leacock

With intense interest and delight I read All Right Mr. Roosevelt. Not being an economist nor an historian, I quite possibly learned more from it than would many people; but it is not the facts that it contains but the general impression of earnestness underlying the light banter, and the real, the serious message of the pamphlet, that make it outstanding. Its message is needed in Canada as well as in the neighbouring country.

Intolerance springs up and grows like the gourd, and like the apples of Sodom it is devoid of life-giving qualities. And intolerance is present in our midst; though more voices are being raised against it in 1939 than in 1914 - that at least is ground for hope. Well do I remember ~~the~~ ^{of some of us} intolerance in 1914-15. It was many sided, and one aspect was a complete lack of appreciation of the American problem. Not until seventeen years later when travelling through Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, Kansas, did I understand something of the ^{situation} ~~situation~~ President Wilson had to face - the difficulty of making a people, born and bred in those vast western regions so far removed from the throbbing heart of world affairs, realize that the problems of one hemisphere are the problems of another. Professor Leacock played a part in those years and now he is continuing the good work.

But this battle against intolerance, hasty judgments, and lack of sympathetic comprehension must not be limited to the sphere of international relations, of politics and policies. In the realm of ethical principles, of spiritual values, there must be maintained the right to freedom of conscience, the right to expression of honest opinions. Intolerance in this realm exists in our midst. It raises its ugly head, it breathes forth a poisonous atmosphere of superficial patriotism and easy jingoism which many people inhale with corrosive results.

Is it not fitting that we resurrect the battle cry of Voltair? -

Écrasez l'infâme! Crush the infamous thing - injustice in his day so rampant in church and state; injustice in our day so obviously rampant in dictator countries, so insidiously present in some of the social structure of our own country, and so appallingly evident in this spirit of intolerance from which our people are not entirely free. Écrasez l'Infâme, fight against intolerance, for it is an infamous thing, subtly undermining sincere honest thought, discouraging the careful examination of basic principles and ideals, drowning the voice of conscience and self criticism under the thunder of invective against the shortcomings and evils of others.

Many of us who were ignorant and intolerant of pacifism and non-resistance in 1914, feel very differently about these things today; and whether we do or do not believe that these methods are applicable in the present crisis, we should honour the moral courage and sincerity - and perhaps the true vision, for the majority are not always nor necessarily right - of those who still maintain that the way of force is not the way to permanent world peace. Certain it is that when the present struggle shall have brought the free democracies to the point called Victory, the way of force must be replaced by the way of mutual helpfulness, sympathy, understanding and cooperation. No policy of suppression of a nation can lead to permanent peace.

But this brief article set out to be a tribute to Stephen Leacock. When he and I were both on the teaching staff of McGill University, I used to hope that some day he would lecture at the R. V. C. and I would have the opportunity to quote a verse from Punch in his honour. But the opportunity never came and now he has been elevated to the high dignity of a Professor Emeritus and I have been reported by an old-timer at McGill as "gone to a better world".

From this other world, I want to pay my tribute to Professor Leacock, to tell him that I sometimes turn up a back number of the old University Magazine and re-read one of the gems from his pen - Master Carton and his

apprentice boys and all the problems of the ethics of journalism arising in the first few days of the world's First Newspaper. I want to tell him that his relatively recent essays on Oxford and on sending his friends to fish in a fishless pool gave me incalculable pleasure; and I want him to know that Serge the Superman brought laughter into our lives in those dark anxious days in England in the winter of - was it 1916? ~~we~~ Not yet had some of us learned that there is a large measure of wisdom in the Voltairian maxim - Solemnity is a disease. Anxieties from without and from within, ~~and~~ the burden of the world's suffering, lay heavy upon us. ~~and~~ Into this atmosphere of grim tenseness there came Further Foolishness dripping merriment from the pen of Stephen Leacock. Many a strained muscle was relaxed, many a burdened heart was lightened. Sir Owen Seaman paid his tribute in several verses in Punch. The last verse only remains in my mind, and I quote it here as memory dictates, a borrowed tribute to one ^{the sparkle of whose mind} ~~inspired~~ banishes our gloom today even as yesterday, while his underlying serious message impels us to pause and to think.

"I would be proud as a peacock
To have it inscribed on my tomb
That I trod in the footsteps of Leacock
In banishing gloom."

When I paused and pondered after laying down All Right Mr. Roosevelt, the thought that came pressing in upon my mind was that here and now it is the duty of every one of us - not of that gifted author alone - to fight against injustice and intolerance in all their forms with every means at our disposal and with all the energy and weight of conviction that is ours. Écrasez l'Infâme!