

GALSWORTHY AT HIS BEST

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Noel Pierson feels much and thinks little. Her elder sister, Gratian, is of the intellectual type. She "wants the truth" and cannot accept her father's dogmatism. "I don't think I mind much about it, one way or the other," says Noel. "I don't know what I want—except that sometimes I want—life—awfully."

This "longing for life" is the thread of the whole story. During the war many besides those actually on the battlefields were faced with the annihilation of life in some of its phases; and Galsworthy shows the various means by which people clung desperately to what was "life" for them.

Noel Pierson is seventeen, pretty, wilful, affectionate. Her father is a saintly, "otherworldly" clergyman. Noel falls deeply in love with a young lieutenant, but her father refuses to let her marry him upon so short an acquaintance. Faced with the fear of losing him forever, Noel gives herself to him before he leaves for France, with the half reasoned, half instinctive belief that "now nothing can take him from me." Her lover is killed and Noel is stunned with grief and the knowledge that she is going to give birth to a child. She gradually derives comfort from the thought that by so doing she will be keeping her lover alive. She does not feel any of the remorse expected of her. "He was my husband," she says to her sister Gratian, "as much as George is yours."

She receives her greatest comfort from her sister's husband, George Laird, a cheerful, busy surgeon. "Life's a huge, wide, adaptable thing, Nollie, and life's going to be the important thing in the future, not comfort and cloistered virtue and security, but living, and pressure to the square inch. All the old hard and fast traditions and drags on life are in the melting pot. . . . You're going to make life—well, that's something to be thankful for, anyway. . . . And if you're not ashamed of yourself, no one else will be."

Nevertheless, Noel feels it difficult and gradually impossible to make this armor of defence invulnerable against the fierce arrows of "public opinion," which for so many centuries has held the attitude of condemnation for the unmarried mother.

The hardest to bear is her father's silent grief and horror, and his inability to help her; for as she is incapable of remorse, so she is unable to accept the spiritual comfort he offers her. Pierson now finds both his daughters shut off from him by an invisible barrier, and his loneliness is increased by the gradual realization that he is out of touch with the world in general.

He goes for advice and comfort to a cousin, Leila, who is nursing in London, after an absence of some years. Her theory of life is exactly the opposite of his, but she is warm-hearted, and helps him while she despises his asceticism. "It is the repression of one's natural instincts, and trying to make others repress theirs that makes half the misery in the world," she says, blaming Pierson for his daughter's tragedy, because he had forbidden her marriage.

Leila has renewed a friendship, begun years before in South Africa, with an invalided soldier, Jimmy Fort; and now at forty-three, feeling youth slipping away from her, and sick of the continual atmosphere of death, she falls in love with Fort and enters with him another stage of her adventurous career. Fort accepts this phase of life with the thought: "What else is there in this God-forsaken world?" He soon has compunctions, however, for he knows that he is not really in love with Leila, and "his heart, for all his wanderings, was soft; he always found it difficult to hurt anyone, and especially anyone who did him the honor to love him." The picture of Fort is evolved slowly and with a master hand. He is never idealized; we see him as a very mortal bit of clay, unobtrusive, not brilliant, not even robust and

cheerful like George Laird, but quiet, steadfast and unfailingly chivalrous.

Fort had met Noel long before, and always thinks of her as a "fairy princess." When Leila, secretly jealous of Noel, tells Fort of her tragedy, hoping to disgust him, she is chagrined to find that, instead, it rouses in him a dangerous compassion.

From this time Leila realizes that she is playing a losing game. There is no greater tragedy in the story than that of this clever, charming woman, who has always tired of a lover before he tired of her, finding herself, almost at middle age, in love with a man who is kind and chivalrous to her, but whose love she cannot hold. Loving him too much to hold him against his will, she slips quietly away to South Africa, facing a hopeless future. Thus Leila finds herself "repressing her natural instincts" after all, because of her love for another.

This ability of Galsworthy to life the so-called sordid into the realm of beauty and tragedy is a power given to few novelists.

The working out of Fort's love for Noel need not be outlined here.

The book is full of bits of trenchant philosophy. In one paragraph, Fort, filled with a burning pity for Noel, says to a group who are philosophizing on life: "These are times of action. Philosophy seems to mean nothing these days. The one thing is to hate tyranny and cruelty, and protect all that's weak and lonely. It's all that's left to make life worth living, when all the packs of the world are out for blood. Why, even we who started out to fight the Prussian pack have caught the pack feeling—have got it all over the country on every sort of scent."

The author makes more than one reference to this "pack feeling" engendered by war. Noel speaks of the brutal treatment of conscientious objectors, and adds: "I don't see much difference in being brutal for good reasons and being brutal for bad ones."

A bit of the philosophy of war is expressed by the Belgian painter, Lavendie: "This war is one great forcing house, mademoiselle. Every living plant is being made to grow too fast, each quality, each passion, hate and love, intolerance and lust and avarice, courage and energy, yes, and self-sacrifice, all being forced and forced beyond their strength, beyond the natural flow of the sap, forced till there has come a wild luxuriant crop, and then—presto! the change comes and these plants wither and rot and stink!"

It is a story that holds the reader's interest by its convincing plot and characterization. It has the added charm of pleasing style and exquisite descriptions of English landscape and of English life; while the varied theories of life and of war expressed by its characters stimulate reflection and leave one with the feeling that the author's own philosophy must be one which "blends, transcends them all."

*"Saints' Progress," by John Galsworthy.

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