

GALSWORTHY JOHN

STUDIES AND ESSAYS:
CONCERNING LETTERS

John Galsworthy
Studies and Essays:
Concerning Letters

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Содержание

A NOVELIST'S ALLEGORY	4
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

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A NOVELIST'S ALLEGORY

Once upon a time the Prince of Felicitas had occasion to set forth on a journey. It was a late autumn evening with few pale stars and a moon no larger than the paring of a finger-nail. And as he rode through the purlieus of his city, the white mane of his amber-coloured steed was all that he could clearly see in the dusk of the high streets. His way led through a quarter but little known to him, and he was surprised to find that his horse, instead of ambling forward with his customary gentle vigour, stepped carefully from side to side, stopping now and then to curve his neck and prick his ears – as though at some thing of fear unseen in the darkness; while on either hand creatures could be heard rustling and scuttling, and little cold draughts as of wings fanned the rider's cheeks.

The Prince at last turned in his saddle, but so great was the darkness that he could not even see his escort.

"What is the name of this street?" he said.

"Sire, it is called the Vita Publica."

"It is very dark." Even as he spoke his horse staggered, but, recovering its foothold with an effort, stood trembling violently. Nor could all the incitements of its master induce the beast again to move forward.

"Is there no one with a lanthorn in this street?" asked the Prince.

His attendants began forthwith to call out loudly for any one who had a lanthorn. Now, it chanced that an old man sleeping in a hovel on a pallet of straw was, awakened by these cries. When he heard that it was the Prince of Felicitas himself, he came hastily, carrying his lanthorn, and stood trembling beside the Prince's horse. It was so dark that the Prince could not see him.

"Light your lanthorn, old man," he said.

The old man laboriously lit his lanthorn. Its pale rays fled out on either hand; beautiful but grim was the vision they disclosed. Tall houses, fair court-yards, and a palm grown garden; in front of the Prince's horse a deep cesspool, on whose jagged edges the good beast's hoofs were planted; and, as far as the glimmer of the lanthorn stretched, both ways down the rutted street, paving stones displaced, and smooth tessellated marble; pools of mud, the hanging fruit of an orange tree, and dark, scurrying shapes of monstrous rats bolting across from house to house. The old man held the lanthorn higher; and instantly bats flying against it would have beaten out the light but for the thin protection of its horn sides.

The Prince sat still upon his horse, looking first at the rutted

space that he had traversed and then at the rutted space before him.

"Without a light," he said, "this thoroughfare is dangerous. What is your name, old man?"

"My name is Cethru," replied the aged churl.

"Cethru!" said the Prince. "Let it be your duty henceforth to walk with your lanthorn up and down this street all night and every night," – and he looked at Cethru: "Do you understand, old man, what it is you have to do?"

The old man answered in a voice that trembled like a rusty flute:

"Aye, aye! – to walk up and down and hold my lanthorn so that folk can see where they be going."

The Prince gathered up his reins; but the old man, lurching forward, touched his stirrup.

"How long be I to go on wi' thickey job?"

"Until you die!"

Cethru held up his lanthorn, and they could see his long, thin face, like a sandwich of dried leather, jerk and quiver, and his thin grey hairs flutter in the draught of the bats' wings circling round the light.

"'Twill be main hard!" he groaned; "an' my lanthorn's nowt but a poor thing."

With a high look, the Prince of Felicitas bent and touched the old man's forehead.

"Until you die, old man," he repeated; and bidding his

followers to light torches from Cethru's lanthorn, he rode on down the twisting street. The clatter of the horses' hoofs died out in the night, and the scuttling and the rustling of the rats and the whispers of the bats' wings were heard again.

Cethru, left alone in the dark thoroughfare, sighed heavily, then, spitting on his hands, he tightened the old girdle round his loins, and slinging the lanthorn on his staff, held it up to the level of his waist, and began to make his way along the street. His progress was but slow, for he had many times to stop and rekindle the flame within his lanthorn, which the bats' wings, his own stumbles, and the jostlings of footpads or of revellers returning home, were for ever extinguishing. In traversing that long street he spent half the night, and half the night in traversing it back again. The saffron swan of dawn, slow swimming up the sky-river between the high roof-banks, bent her neck down through the dark air-water to look at him staggering below her, with his still smoking wick. No sooner did Cethru see that sunlit bird, than with a great sigh of joy he sat him down, and at once fell asleep.

Now when the dwellers in the houses of the Vita Publica first gained knowledge that this old man passed every night with his lanthorn up and down their street, and when they marked those pallid gleams gliding over the motley prospect of cesspools and garden gates, over the sightless hovels and the rich-carved frontages of their palaces; or saw them stay their journey and remain suspended like a handful of daffodils held up against the black stuffs of secrecy – they said:

"It is good that the old man should pass like this – we shall see better where we're going; and if the Watch have any job on hand, or want to put the pavements in order, his lanthorn will serve their purpose well enough." And they would call out of their doors and windows to him passing:

"Hola! old man Cethru! All's well with our house, and with the street before it?"

But, for answer, the old man only held his lanthorn up, so that in the ring of its pale light they saw some sight or other in the street. And his silence troubled them, one by one, for each had expected that he would reply:

"Aye, aye! All's well with your house, Sirs, and with the street before it!"

Thus they grew irritated with this old man who did not seem able to do anything but just hold his lanthorn up. And gradually they began to dislike his passing by their doors with his pale light, by which they could not fail to see, not only the rich-carved frontages and scrolled gates of courtyards and fair gardens, but things that were not pleasing to the eye. And they murmured amongst themselves: "What is the good of this old man and his silly lanthorn? We can see all we want to see without him; in fact, we got on very well before he came."

So, as he passed, rich folk who were supping would pelt him with orange-peel and empty the dregs of their wine over his head; and poor folk, sleeping in their hutches, turned over, as the rays of the lanthorn fell on them, and cursed him for that

disturbance. Nor did revellers or footpads treat the old man, civilly, but tied him to the wall, where he was constrained to stay till a kind passerby released him. And ever the bats darkened his lanthorn with their wings and tried to beat the flame out. And the old man thought: "This be a terrible hard job; I don't seem to please nobody." But because the Prince of Felicitas had so commanded him, he continued nightly to pass with his lanthorn up and down the street; and every morning as the saffron swan came swimming overhead, to fall asleep. But his sleep did not last long, for he was compelled to pass many hours each day in gathering rushes and melting down tallow for his lanthorn; so that his lean face grew more than ever like a sandwich of dried leather.

Now it came to pass that the Town Watch having had certain complaints made to them that persons had been bitten in the Vita Publica by rats, doubted of their duty to destroy these ferocious creatures; and they held investigation, summoning the persons bitten and inquiring of them how it was that in so dark a street they could tell that the animals which had bitten them were indeed rats. Howbeit for some time no one could be found who could say more than what he had been told, and since this was not evidence, the Town Watch had good hopes that they would not after all be forced to undertake this tedious enterprise. But presently there came before them one who said that he had himself seen the rat which had bitten him, by the light of an old man's lanthorn. When the Town Watch heard this they were

vexed, for they knew that if this were true they would now be forced to prosecute the arduous undertaking, and they said:

"Bring in this old man!"

Cethru was brought before them trembling.

"What is this we hear, old man, about your lanthorn and the rat? And in the first place, what were you doing in the Vita Publica at that time of night?"

Cethru answered: "I were just passin' with my lanthorn!"

"Tell us – did you see the rat?"

Cethru shook his head: "My lanthorn seed the rat, maybe!" he muttered.

"Old owl!" said the Captain of the Watch: "Be careful what you say! If you saw the rat, why did you then not aid this unhappy citizen who was bitten by it – first, to avoid that rodent, and subsequently to slay it, thereby relieving the public of a pestilential danger?"

Cethru looked at him, and for some seconds did not reply; then he said slowly: "I were just passin' with my lanthorn."

"That you have already told us," said the Captain of the Watch; "it is no answer."

Cethru's leathern cheeks became wine-coloured, so desirous was he to speak, and so unable. And the Watch sneered and laughed, saying:

"This is a fine witness."

But of a sudden Cethru spoke:

"What would I be duin' – killin' rats; tidden my business to

kill rats."

The Captain of the Watch caressed his beard, and looking at the old man with contempt, said:

"It seems to me, brothers, that this is an idle old vagabond, who does no good to any one. We should be well advised, I think, to prosecute him for vagrancy. But that is not at this moment the matter in hand. Owing to the accident – scarcely fortunate – of this old man's passing with his lanthorn, it would certainly appear that citizens have been bitten by rodents. It is then, I fear, our duty to institute proceedings against those poisonous and violent animals."

And amidst the sighing of the Watch, it was so resolved.

Cethru was glad to shuffle away, unnoticed, from the Court, and sitting down under a camel-date tree outside the City Wall, he thus reflected:

"They were rough with me! I done nothin', so far's I can see!"

And a long time he sat there with the bunches of the camel-dates above him, golden as the sunlight. Then, as the scent of the lyric-flowers, released by evening, warned him of the night dropping like a flight of dark birds on the plain, he rose stiffly, and made his way as usual toward the Vita Publica.

He had traversed but little of that black thoroughfare, holding his lanthorn at the level of his breast, when the sound of a splash and cries for help smote his long, thin ears. Remembering how the Captain of the Watch had admonished him, he stopped and peered about, but owing to his proximity to the light of his own

lanthorn he saw nothing. Presently he heard another splash and the sound of blowings and of puffings, but still unable to see clearly whence they came, he was forced in bewilderment to resume his march. But he had no sooner entered the next bend of that obscure and winding avenue than the most lamentable, lusty cries assailed him. Again he stood still, blinded by his own light. Somewhere at hand a citizen was being beaten, for vague, quick-moving forms emerged into the radiance of his lanthorn out of the deep violet of the night air. The cries swelled, and died away, and swelled; and the mazed Cethru moved forward on his way. But very near the end of his first traversage, the sound of a long, deep sighing, as of a fat man in spiritual pain, once more arrested him.

"Drat me!" he thought, "this time I will see what 'tis," and he spun round and round, holding his lanthorn now high, now low, and to both sides. "The devil an' all's in it to-night," he murmured to himself; "there's some'at here fetchin' of its breath awful loud." But for his life he could see nothing, only that the higher he held his lanthorn the more painful grew the sound of the fat but spiritual sighing. And desperately, he at last resumed his progress.

On the morrow, while he still slept stretched on his straw pallet, there came to him a member of the Watch.

"Old man, you are wanted at the Court House; rouse up, and bring your lanthorn."

Stiffly Cethru rose.

"What be they wantin' me fur now, mester?"

"Ah!" replied the Watchman, "they are about to see if they can't put an end to your goings-on."

Cethru shivered, and was silent.

Now when they reached the Court House it was patent that a great affair was forward; for the Judges were in their robes, and a crowd of advocates, burgesses, and common folk thronged the careen, lofty hall of justice.

When Cethru saw that all eyes were turned on him, he shivered still more violently, fixing his fascinated gaze on the three Judges in their emerald robes.

"This then is the prisoner," said the oldest of the Judges; "proceed with the indictment!"

A little advocate in snuff-coloured clothes rose on little legs, and commenced to read:

"Forasmuch as on the seventeenth night of August fifteen hundred years since the Messiah's death, one Celestine, a maiden of this city, fell into a cesspool in the Vita Publica, and while being quietly drowned, was espied of the burgess Pardonix by the light of a lanthorn held by the old man Cethru; and, forasmuch as, plunging in, the said Pardonix rescued her, not without grave risk of life and the ruin, of his clothes, and to-day lies ill of fever; and forasmuch as the old man Cethru was the cause of these misfortunes to the burgess Pardonix, by reason of his wandering lanthorn's showing the drowning maiden, the Watch do hereby indict, accuse, and otherwise place charge upon this Cethru of

'Vagabondage without serious occupation.'

"And, forasmuch as on this same night the Watchman Filepo, made aware, by the light of this said Cethru's lanthorn, of three sturdy footpads, went to arrest them, and was set on by the rogues and well-nigh slain, the Watch do hereby indict, accuse, and otherwise charge upon Cethru complicity in this assault, by reasons, namely, first, that he discovered the footpads to the Watchman and the Watchman to the footpads by the light of his lanthorn; and, second, that, having thus discovered them, he stood idly by and gave no assistance to the law.

"And, forasmuch as on this same night the wealthy burgess Pranzo, who, having prepared a banquet, was standing in his doorway awaiting the arrival of his guests, did see, by the light of the said Cethru's lanthorn, a beggar woman and her children grovelling in the gutter for garbage, whereby his appetite was lost completely; and, forasmuch as he, Pranzo, has lodged a complaint against the Constitution for permitting women and children to go starved, the Watch do hereby indict, accuse, and otherwise make charge on Cethru of rebellion and of anarchy, in that wilfully he doth disturb good citizens by showing to them without provocation disagreeable sights, and doth moreover endanger the laws by causing persons to desire to change them.

"These be the charges, reverend Judges, so please you!"

And having thus spoken, the little advocate resumed his seat. Then said the oldest of the Judges:

"Cethru, you have heard; what answer do you make?"

But no word, only the chattering of teeth, came from Cethru.

"Have you no defence?" said the Judge: "these are grave accusations!"

Then Cethru spoke:

"So please your Highnesses," he said, "can I help what my lanthorn sees?"

And having spoken these words, to all further questions he remained more silent than a headless man.

The Judges took counsel of each other, and the oldest of them thus addressed himself to Cethru:

"If you have no defence, old man, and there is no one will say a word for you, we can but proceed to judgment."

Then in the main aisle of the Court there rose a youthful advocate.

"Most reverend Judges," he said in a mellifluous voice, clearer than the fluting of a bell-bird, "it is useless to look for words from this old man, for it is manifest that he himself is nothing, and that his lanthorn is alone concerned in this affair. But, reverend Judges, bethink you well: Would you have a lanthorn ply a trade or be concerned with a profession, or do aught indeed but pervade the streets at night, shedding its light, which, if you will, is vagabondage? And, Sirs, upon the second count of this indictment: Would you have a lanthorn dive into cesspools to rescue maidens? Would you have a lanthorn to beat footpads? Or, indeed, to be any sort of partisan either of the Law or of them that break the Law? Sure, Sirs, I think not. And as to this

third charge of fostering anarchy let me but describe the trick of this lantern's flame. It is distilled, most reverend Judges, of oil and wick, together with that sweet secret heat of whose birth no words of mine can tell. And when, Sirs, this pale flame has sprung into the air swaying to every wind, it brings vision to the human eye. And, if it be charged on this old man Cethru that he and his lantern by reason of their showing not only the good but the evil bring no pleasure into the world, I ask, Sirs, what in the world is so dear as this power to see whether it be the beautiful or the foul that is disclosed? Need I, indeed, tell you of the way this flame spreads its feelers, and delicately darts and hovers in the darkness, conjuring things from nothing? This mechanical summoning, Sirs, of visions out of blackness is benign, by no means of malevolent intent; no more than if a man, passing two donkeys in the road, one lean and the other fat, could justly be arraigned for malignancy because they were not both fat. This, reverend Judges, is the essence of the matter concerning the rich burgess, Pranzo, who, on account of the sight he saw by Cethru's lantern, has lost the equilibrium of his stomach. For, Sirs, the lantern did but show that which was there, both fair and foul, no more, no less; and though it is indeed true that Pranzo is upset, it was not because the lantern maliciously produced distorted images, but merely caused to be seen, in due proportions, things which Pranzo had not seen before. And surely, reverend Judges, being just men, you would not have this lantern turn its light away from what is ragged and ugly because there are also fair

things on which its light may fall; how, indeed, being a lantern, could it, if it would? And I would have you note this, Sirs, that by this impartial discovery of the proportions of one thing to another, this lantern must indeed perpetually seem to cloud and sadden those things which are fair, because of the deep instincts of harmony and justice planted in the human breast. However unfair and cruel, then, this lantern may seem to those who, deficient in these instincts, desire all their lives to see naught but what is pleasant, lest they, like Pranzo, should lose their appetites – it is not consonant with equity that this lantern should, even if it could, be prevented from thus mechanically buffeting the holiday cheek of life. I would think, Sirs, that you should rather blame the queazy state of Pranzo's stomach. The old man has said that he cannot help what his lantern sees. This is a just saying. But if, reverend Judges, you deem this equipoised, indifferent lantern to be indeed blameworthy for having shown in the same moment, side by side, the skull and the fair face, the burdock and the tiger-lily, the butterfly and toad, then, most reverend Judges, punish it, but do not punish this old man, for he himself is but a flume of smoke, thistle down dispersed – nothing!"

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