A Question to Democracy

By FAITH ADAMS

THE Gold Star has disappeared from my neighbor's window, for two years have elapsed since the Armistice. The boy who went out from the house next door was the eldest of the family. I know that he died for Democracy. Yet I never saw the gold emblem that marked his sacrifice without being conscious of a vague uneasiness because I know that my neighbor's son died for something he had never known and would not have known had he lived.

When the L—s first moved into our street they caused no small commotion. They were the only middle class colored people in our small suburban community. There are, of course, plenty of colored people beyond the railroad in Shantytown, plenty, that is to supply our needs in regard to laundresses, scrubwomen, and children's nurses, but the idea of a colored physician and his family moving into one of the best houses on Elm Street was preposterous. As the nearest prospective neighbors of the invaders, we were objects of sympathy. Our friends expected us to become the leaders of an opposition and I do not know exactly why we failed to live up to their expectations. In some ways it would have been easier, but something in me—perhaps a strain of Abolition ancestry—asserted itself in a sudden burning shame at the thought. We declined to lead a movement to make it impossible for the L—s to enter the home they had bought. But in spite of our defection they did not succeed in entering their house until a lawsuit bitterly contested at every point had been won by them in several courts. In coming, they brought with them a profound and significant idea of Democracy which has never been solved and which has maintained its rigid outline, through all the patriotic enthusiasm that swept away a dozen hyphens and consolidated every other element in our community during the war, a problem which persisted in spite of the Gold Star that used to hang in my neighbor's window.

The trouble encountered by the L—s was not an isolated phenomenon. It was a characteristic and attendant circumstance of every act of their lives. I wonder if any reader, whatever his or her views on the Race question, has ever paused to consider, not so much the comparatively simple one which finds its origin in the mere inconveniences of being a Negro in a hostile white community, especially the daily and hourly inconvenience of being that complex, highly sensitized creature, an intellectual Negro in a hostile white community. "But why do they come here?" lamented my white neighbors. "Why don't they stay with their own people?" ask those who feel that the troubles are of their own making. I believe that the answer is simple. They want the same advantages for their children that we want for ours. They moved to Elm Street to obtain those advantages in the face of our antagonism, rather than live in Shantytown, or in the South from which they came, or in the crowded insanitary districts which are usually the only ones accessible to urban negroes. So far as possible in our Christian Democratic community, we have made it impossible for them to achieve this. Of course we have not been entirely successful. We are a Northern community and there are still traces of respect for the individual's civil rights written into our laws and upheld by our courts. We have so far succeeded, however, that I, who gave no sons to my country, cannot remember the Gold Star that used to hang in my neighbor's window without a feeling of humiliation.

Primarily, the problem of my neighbors concerns their children. If America means anything to us, it means the future of our children, a future presumably freer, happier, surer than that of any children in the world. It does not mean this to the L—s. They have three children since their elder boy was killed, two daughters of sixteen and ten, respectively, and a boy of eight. The second daughter, Katherine, is the one I know best. She and my ten-year-old daughter are classmates. They walk to and from school together and are friends after a fashion, and yet I know that there is not an aspect of their environment that is the same to both. The very feeling of the sun and wind on her face is a different thing to my colored neighbor's little daughter than it is to mine because she is colored. My ten-year-old is a tomboy. In her short vigorous life she has never stopped to think whether she was "nice" or as good as anyone else. Her speech and manners are free, emphatic, and quite devoid of grace. She tears her clothes, falls into the pond, climbs trees, walls, roofs, and anything else which can be climbed, hitches her sash on to passing teams despite emphatic warnings and stands cheerfully somewhere between the foot and the middle of her class. She goes forth unconcernedly on errands, or pursues adventurous ends of her own. She is a perfectly ordinary, very healthy and really nice child, far less talented than sensitive little Katherine, but she has never in her life been afraid or unwelcome or very unhappy. Her world has boundless horizons and endless possibilities of adventure. It may seem a small thing to you but, remembering my own childhood, there is nothing for which I am more thankful than that my children have adventures. Our town and the world are decently safe for Elizabeth or relatively so. She may break an arm or a leg one of these days, but I know that her heart and her spirit will not be broken. I realize that Katherine's mother does not share this security, that there is no aspect of life in our charming village that is not haunted by her by shapes of shame and terror. Each day she wakes to a dread of things unbelievably ugly from which she cannot shield her child. I know that she awaits Katherine's return from school each day in fear of seeing in the child's face that some irreparably cruel thing has happened to her.

Meanwhile Katherine's clothes are always immaeulately laundered, her ways are gentle, her speech is soft and punctiliously correct. She stands well in school and is particularly gifted in music and drawing. If the color line does not hem them in too closely, by the time she graduates my neighbors hope to send her to an art school for a year and then, perhaps, to Europe. It will take money, of course, and their means are slender, but where else, they ask passionately, can she possibly fulfill the promise that is in her.

Barbara, the older daughter, will enter college this fall. She was to have had the R—s College scholarship, awarded every year to a member of the graduating class of the High School, but as the L—s say quietly, "something happened." Something usually does happen in such cases it seems, so they were not much surprised. Whether or not
they are right, I cannot say, but they and hundreds of
colored people like them, people of sober judgment and in-
tegrity believe that in such contests they are habitually
cheated by white people. Barbara was admittedly the best
student in her class. If the scholarship had been awarded
according to precedent it would have gone to her as the
holder of the highest general average for the entire four
years, but this year the Faculty Committee departed from
precedent and awarded it to Ruth H——, our minister's
daughter and holder of the second highest average. Ruth's
work, they said, showed more originality. Is this happy
result merely a departure from hide-bound academicism and
as such to be applauded or just what the L——s think it,
the cheating of a sixteen-year-old child out of the fruits of
four years' work? In any case, everyone was glad for Ruth,
a general favorite, and her father has allowed her to accept.
Barbara will enter college, of course, but she will have to
work a little harder to make both ends meet. Already she
is a little older, a little quieter.

And so it goes! The only one of my neighbor's children
who still seems quite merry is Archie, the youngest. He
is delicate and does not go to school, but studies at home
with his mother. I like to see him laughing and tumbling
about the lawn like any other boy of eight, but I know that
if he were to venture outside the gate and a block or so
down the street, he would find the hereditary enemy lying
in wait for him. He did venture once, and his mother had
to explain to him when he came back bruised and troubled
why the white boys called him names and threw things at
him. They weren't "tough" boys either, nor members of
the white gangs that the L——s moved from the city to
avoid, but the nice little sons of some of our leading citi-
zans. When they discussed the invasion of the L——s at
home and abroad in loud and angry tones, those same citi-
zans did not intend to suggest to their sons that it was a
good game to hunt down Archie, but somehow the boys have
learned that he is an intruder and so in the good old tribal
fashion transmitted by their parents, they threw stones
and shouted "nigger." Archie never goes out alone now and
Katherine usually goes to school with Elizabeth. "It's a
little safer for a girl!" Mrs. L——s says wistfully. Just
how safe it is, I know from what Elizabeth has told me of
the jeers that Katherine daily endures. It is Elizabeth, and
not Katherine, who resents those jeers and who, on occa-
sions, puts Katherine's tormentors to flight, while Kath-
erine walks on quietly, "just as if she didn't care!"

You see, Katherine is not only a little ten-year-old girl;
she is a representative of her race, and so are all the L——s.
The freedom and unconsciousness of normal, happy child-
hood are not for her, as they were not for Barbara and as
they will not long be for Archie. Compared with her, how
robust and spontaneous my Elizabeth seems. Elizabeth can
forget herself. This is just what Katherine can not do.
Her shrinking self-consciousness is a distressing thing. But
even if she could lose herself in work or play, how quickly
she would be forced to remember. Alone, Katherine might
perhaps forget for a moment that she is colored, but the
world about her never forgets. To that world she is colored
first, and a child with a child's needs afterwards.

As it is with the children, it is with their elders in a far
greater degree. They, too, are the representatives of their
race first, human beings only secondarily. Just what this
means in actual nervous strain, if in no other way, is a diffi-
cult thing for any of those who belong to the dominant race
to estimate. It means eternal vigilance and eternal self-
consciousness. It means doubt, hesitation and never-ending
complications in the most commonplace incidents of daily
living. It means, even under such favorable conditions as
obtain in B——, a constant uncertainty of life, health and
happiness. How great a gift my own careless certainty of
a very few elementary things now seems to me! In par-
cular the certainty I have of meeting in the ordinary walks
of life with ordinary courtesy, decency and fair play; of
always meeting in an emergency with deep kindliness, dor-
mant before perhaps, but called into being by nothing more
than my need of it; my certainty of fellowship, of equality,
of respect if it is due me; my certainty of getting pretty
generally anything which I honestly work or pay for and
sometimes more than this, and of foretelling the morrow
with some accuracy and laying my plans accordingly for my-
self and my children. Can you imagine being able to take
none of these things for granted? If you can, your imagi-
nation serves you better than most in trying to realize what
daily life means to the L——s.

In one of our "high-brow" monthlies, an American woman
wrote recently of her readiness to kill in defense of what
"middle class America" meant to her. It meant just such
a safe, sure, happy freedom from dependence on the irra-
tional and violent in human nature as it does to me. It
does not mean this to the L——s, and yet they, too, are of
"middle class America." They give it their passionate
loyalty and hold it to be good, except in so far as it ex-
cludes them or others because of race, creed or color—a
loyalty which is constantly and tragically betrayed by the
reality, while the weakness of my own weaker faith in its
institutions is constantly being justified. Do you think I
am exaggerating? Then consider for a moment these
parallels in the lives of two middle-class Americans, Mrs.
L—— and myself.

If I want to go away for the hot weather, all I have to
do is to look up some jolly mountain or seashore spot within
my means, pack my bags and go. Mrs. L—— cannot do this.
Of all the wealth and loveliness of our natural resources,
the greater part is closed to her. Hotels, boarding houses,
and camps are almost entirely in the hands of white people
who exclude colored ones. There are a few, a very few,
resorts for colored people but they are generally crowded
and not always desirable. To rent or buy a summer cottage,
however simple, is difficult and expensive. Too many white
people refuse to have colored neighbors! Long trips are
not to be thought of because it is necessary to depend on
hotel and sleeping-car accommodations. Just once, in the
flush of youth, Dr. and Mrs. L—— did attempt a trip. They
took their oldest children to see Niagara and the Great
Lakes. The experience was one they have never cared
to repeat. So the L——s spend the summer in sunbaked B——.
There are worse hardships, of course, and yet why should
the desirable thing which for me is so simple, that is, to
give Elizabeth the wild freedom of the woods or an outing
at the beach for two months each year, be impossible for
them? They do spend a few days sometimes in a small
colored hotel at a glittering resort on the Jersey coast, but
they do not call it "taking their children to the country,"
and neither, I think, would you.

Again, let us say that a member of my family is stricken
suddenly with a serious illness, or requires an immediate
operation. It is a hard time and an anxious one, but how
comparatively smooth and simple my course will be. I
tained by pride, or irony, or the sense of having a cause, is not a substitute, it seems to me, for living fully and freely and to the limit of our powers.

The war which cut so sharply across our lives, obliterating race and class lines, once seemed about to wipe out even the barriers which separated the L—s from the rest of us. We were all Americans with a common cause—Democracy. In the name of Democracy we drafted black and white Americans impartially and sent them out to die. We taught them both to make sacrifices, to work and fight and save. We sold them both Liberty Bonds and Thrift Stamps and urged on both alike the need of war time effort and economy. But there Democracy ended. It drafted Robert L—s. It has since taken his life. But it excluded his mother from the workrooms of the Red Cross organization in B— just as it has excluded and separated colored people the country over in every kind of war and war relief work. Democracy does not mean social equality, I may be told at this point, and there are many whose chosen work it seems to be to popularize this misconception. But if it does not mean equality, it means nothing. We did not knowingly go out to fight for “Democracy-within-caste-limits.” It is not an inspiring slogan. Certainly it was not for such a qualified Democracy that Robert L—s and other young colored Americans died. What they really died for, I do not know. Neither do I know what of faith or despair or necessity drove them to their death in the American Forces. But I do see in the memory of my colored neighbor’s Gold Star the most insistent question that has yet been put to our Democracy.

A Letter to Mr. J. C. Squire

Editor of the London Mercury

DEAR MR. SQUIRE: Since the appearance of the first number of your huge monthly I have searched eagerly through each succeeding issue for some trace of a curiosity there is said to be in England concerning contemporary American poetry. That such an interest does exist I have only on the word of Robert Nichols, one of your infant prodigies and lately an honored guest in the United States, who, however, when I asked him how it happens that American poetry does not sell in England, replied: “But, you see, we’ve such a bally lot of our own stuff to buy and read.”

In the absence of any sincere criticism in the Mercury of the work of the younger American poets I am grateful that you have not shamed silence by publishing the opinions of the terrible children whom your foreign office lately granted passports to America as the representatives of literary England. They came here, their pockets bulging with manuscript poems in praise of Nature, expecting to see the disheveled children of Punch’s Uncle Sam, and not a little disappointed to find us fairly critical if always exuberant hosts. Before they could obtain anything like an insight into the true poetry and people of America their lecture tours were finished, their shekels collected; they were once more feasted and toasted, and then they scuttled back to London and a more fitting obscurity.

Tell me, please, who sends those children here? Can nothing be done to regulate the problem of who is to come and whom we are to receive as the representatives of literary
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