

ENGLAND'S HIGH RESOLVE TO SAVE DEMOCRACY.

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**The Change in the Spirit of the People Not Understood Abroad —
Questions It Raises for America.**

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By ELIZABETH ROBINS.

[See notes at end.]

New York, March 10th, 1916.

To the editor of the New York Times:

Since I was in America a year ago, I have seen the birth of a New England. Through the earlier months of the war, there was not, even among the expert few, the faintest realization of what the struggle was to be, either in time or intensity.

One word about this same unpreparedness, for it is perhaps England's highest distinction, and most valid claim upon the democracies of the world.

Consider the "stuff" for war she had at command, and her past military record. She might have made war what Mirabeau says her enemies have made of it: "a national industry." To such an extent had she abandoned the art, that she has needed time and suffering to relearn the old barbarous lessons.

Until August, 1914, England was otherwise occupied. At home she was cultivating the arts of peace and broadening the democratic basis. For what is the outstanding political fact of English history since 1813 but an increasing collaboration between governors and the governed, an increasing number of the people bidden to share in public affairs?

If that has been her business at home, what was she about abroad? Besides carrying on her commerce, which filled the ports and populated all the seas, she was occupied in such feats of government as preparing and conferring a constitution upon a conquered people in South Africa; in meeting the complex claims entailed by her responsibilities in India, Egypt, and the colonies, and in discharging her responsibilities in such a way as made those distant populations fly to her aid with money and with men, in their tens of thousands, to defend her and to die for her.

England herself expected no such proof of the success of those activities to which she had devoted herself during the time the enemy was arming for her destruction. But the enemy has seen, with undisguised amazement, the vindication of her genius for administration and the evidence of her power for inspiring love and faith.

In the liberties England has conferred on her dependencies we seem to see her realization that the dominion of force, however triumphant and at any given time, is never a safe dominion. There is in a mutable world like ours a practical certainty that a yet greater force will arrive to drive the victor of yesterday

out of the field. A mere question of time. There is no safety under heaven except in voluntary co-operation.

To any one like myself, who has been much in Germany and loved her literature and many of her people, there is no shadow of doubt as to their great power to serve mankind. Their tragic failure is, in essence, a lack of faith. Germany would dragoon the people into order and prosperity. She will do anything for them under heaven except trust them.

To make people responsible by giving them responsibility, to induce the spirit of voluntary cooperation was England's contribution to the world. You are in contact with the civilizing effect of that quality every hour you live among her people.

Not to dwell on the gentle manners of the great mass of the population, you feel the spirit of co-operation at work in the most visible sign of the arm of the law. The policeman in England is your friend. He is the public's friend. In Germany he is your enemy and the public's enemy. Rude, tyrannical, hated by his own townsfolk, he is the symbol not of good sense and civic co-operation, but of despotism, as though he were intent on carrying out the idea expressed by the Kaiser in a speech made soon after his accession: "One only is master within the empire and I will tolerate no other." The German policeman conveys to you that you are to do this or that not because it is reasonable and for the common good, but because obedience is your first business. As I have private cause to know, and as a publicist has recently said: with the German terror, not sense of justice, is held to be the best security for obedience. If that view should prevail, the men of the

future will not find themselves inheritors of thousands of years of progress; they will find themselves back at civilization's starting point. The question for us to answer is: Shall we follow the leader in this retreat to cave conditions? For you may call the new coercion "high explosive," "airship," or what you like. It is the old savagery with a new face.

In England you see today the expression of the spirit of co-operation in the greatest voluntary army that history has known. And you see the same principle in a more impressive spectacle: a whole great nation enrolled for service. At the ghastly price of war, a new kind of socialism has been attained.

Service has become the badge of honor, and idleness disgrace. To give -- work or treasure or life -- is the common passion.

The week I sailed, a group of moneyed men, who formerly fought death duties and insurance acts, met in London to appoint a deputy deputation to the Prime Minister. The object was to induce Mr. Asquith to bring pressure upon the Chancellor to impose a severer scheme of taxation. The poor give to funds, give with both hands to the soldiers, give the produce of little poultry runs and cottage gardens to the fleet, and all classes give their sons.

Speaking of a uniform for the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry recently sanctioned by the War Office, a sometime "smart woman," now working in a canteen, said: "Our old clothes are our uniform."

People are ashamed of luxury -- even the aged and the ailing are ashamed of idleness. It is an England

purged and strengthened by a spirit which reaches out to the limits of the empire.

It is in this changed England that a danger lurks for other nations, the neutral quite as much as the enemy. The rest of the world is too prone to think that because the Englishman was not easily roused, he is not thoroughly roused. I find that many Americans have but little idea what England's contribution has been. Apart from what she herself has achieved, she is behind all that the Allies have achieved. But for her, long ago they must have given in.

England's unreadiness in blowing her own trumpet has been misunderstood. It is a busy world, and, while everybody has time to criticise, few have time to inform themselves. We misjudge the Englishman's account of himself because we too often judge him by our standards instead of by his own. Just as overstatement is the tendency, if not the habit, of most people, so of the English is understatement. Self-criticism, often self-deprecation, is the form his particular kind of pride takes -- often a stinging effective rebuke to the boastfulness of others.

I repeat, as my special message to my own country, there is danger not only for England's enemies in her old ingrained habit of inarticulateness and her new, her very new, reaction to the crisis in which she found herself in the second year of the war.

No unprejudiced eye can have watched the transformation the last year has made without realizing it is idle to expect that a people like these English, rich and luxurious, who can yet voluntarily

assume poverty and voluntarily accept hardship, will be brought to consider a peace which is ineffectual or which is unfair, whether toward herself or her allies.

England will fight on.

The outside world very imperfectly understands her resources, her strength of resistance, above all, her power of enduring.

There is no price her destiny can demand of her which she will not pay for free institutions.

I do not say she is invincible -- I know nothing about that. I go only so far as to ask: What price are the free countries of the world prepared to see England pay for the crime of failing to tax the pockets of the free spirits of her people with the maintenance of a great military system? Are the democracies of the world prepared to see her bleed to death for that?

What lover of free institutions who knows modern Germany can think of her triumph without knowing his dearest beliefs in danger?

In danger? In peril of extinction for generations to come!

ELIZABETH ROBINS.

[Published 11 March 1916 in the *New York Times*. Transcribed for the Elizabeth Robins Web. This document is in the Sue Thomas Bibliography as item 236. Thomas notes it is also reprinted as the Appendix of *Theatre and Friendship: Some Henry James Letters with a Commentary by Elizabeth Robins*, 1932. For placement in the *New York Times*, consult page 10, columns 7-8. For pages of the reprint in *Theatre and Friendship*, pp. 299-303. Punctuation and English spelling are retained.

I discuss in my biography (pp. 225-6) the way that Robins' last chapter of this volume of letters builds to the significance of her declaration that she was sure that, despite Henry James's failing health, the war had killed him just as certainly as if he had died in the trenches. She paints a picture of James in his last months, primarily situated at De Vere Gardens (where he had composed *The Golden Bowl* and she had visited him often). In her retrospective on the efforts to persuade America to assist the Allies, she asserts that James hosted the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, and President Wilson's envoy to Europe, Colonel Edward M. House. She paints a picture of Grey pointing out to her that House and she would be sailing on the same ship to America. Alluding to the efforts James made to assist British soldiers with his volunteer work in hospitals and to his renouncing of American citizenship to protest the reluctance of the U.S. to condemn German atrocities, Robins demonstrates how she makes her own similar positions known to House, who was on record for saying when he had just recently visited Germany that he loved Germany more each time he visited it. House is reluctant to tell Robins whether he can influence Wilson to support Britain, but he promises to recommend Robins to a *New York Times* editor. The result is this letter. The chapter in *Theatre and Friendship* leading up to the letter's reprinting in the Appendix promises more testimony to the spirit of a determined Great Britain than the brief letter supports. Its main theme, of course, is the way she hears about the death of Henry James, when she is standing aside his nephew and namesake as officials greet him with the news when their ship, the *New Amsterdam*, docks in New York.

Some months after Robins promoted America to align with England, she fictionalized a meeting between a very young visionary and President Wilson. Nan, the young advocate in her war-time novel, *The Messenger*, carries her fiancé's peace proposal, dubbed his "League of Nations Manifesto," to the White House to attempt to persuade Wilson that he can be of influence. Robins composed the novel in the period roughly corresponding to America's participation in the war. It began serialization in *Century Magazine* in November 1918. See further discussion in my biography, pp. 230-232.]