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AFTER THE WAR - WHAT?

AN ADDRESS

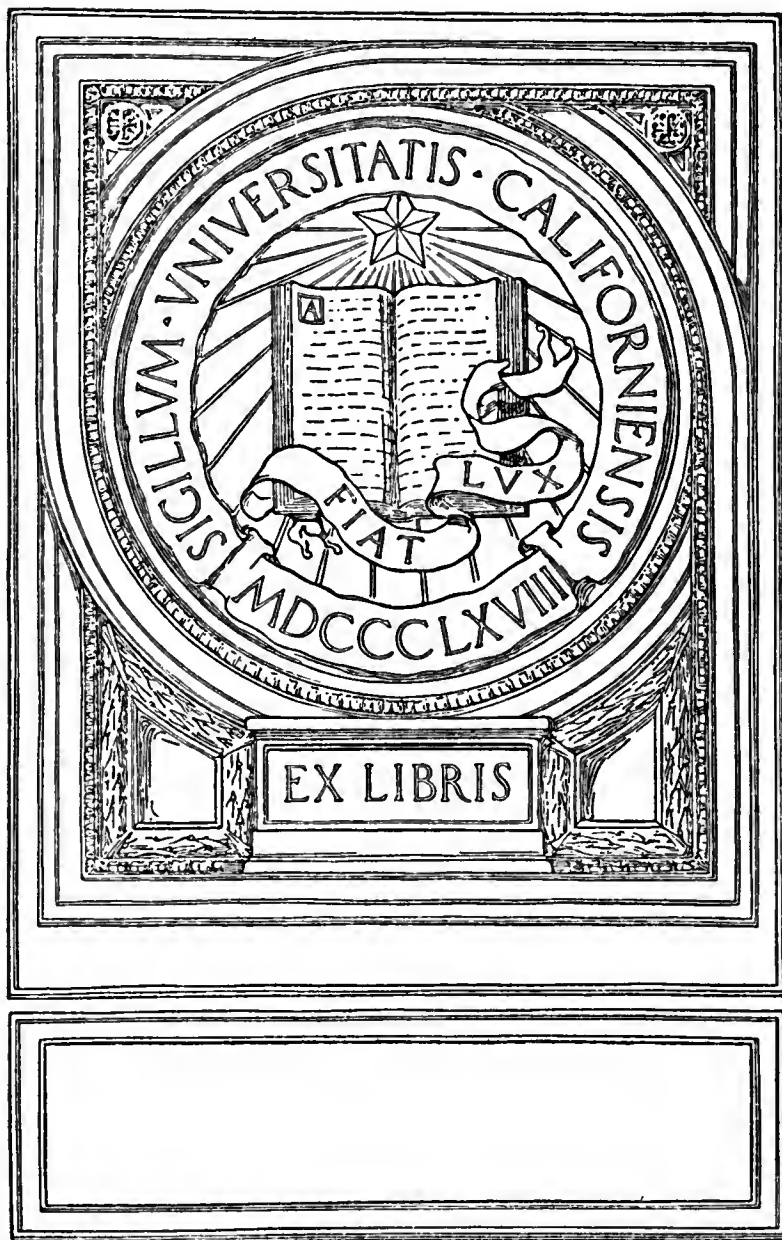
BY STOCKTON AXSON

BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY CLUB

OF SAN FRANCISCO

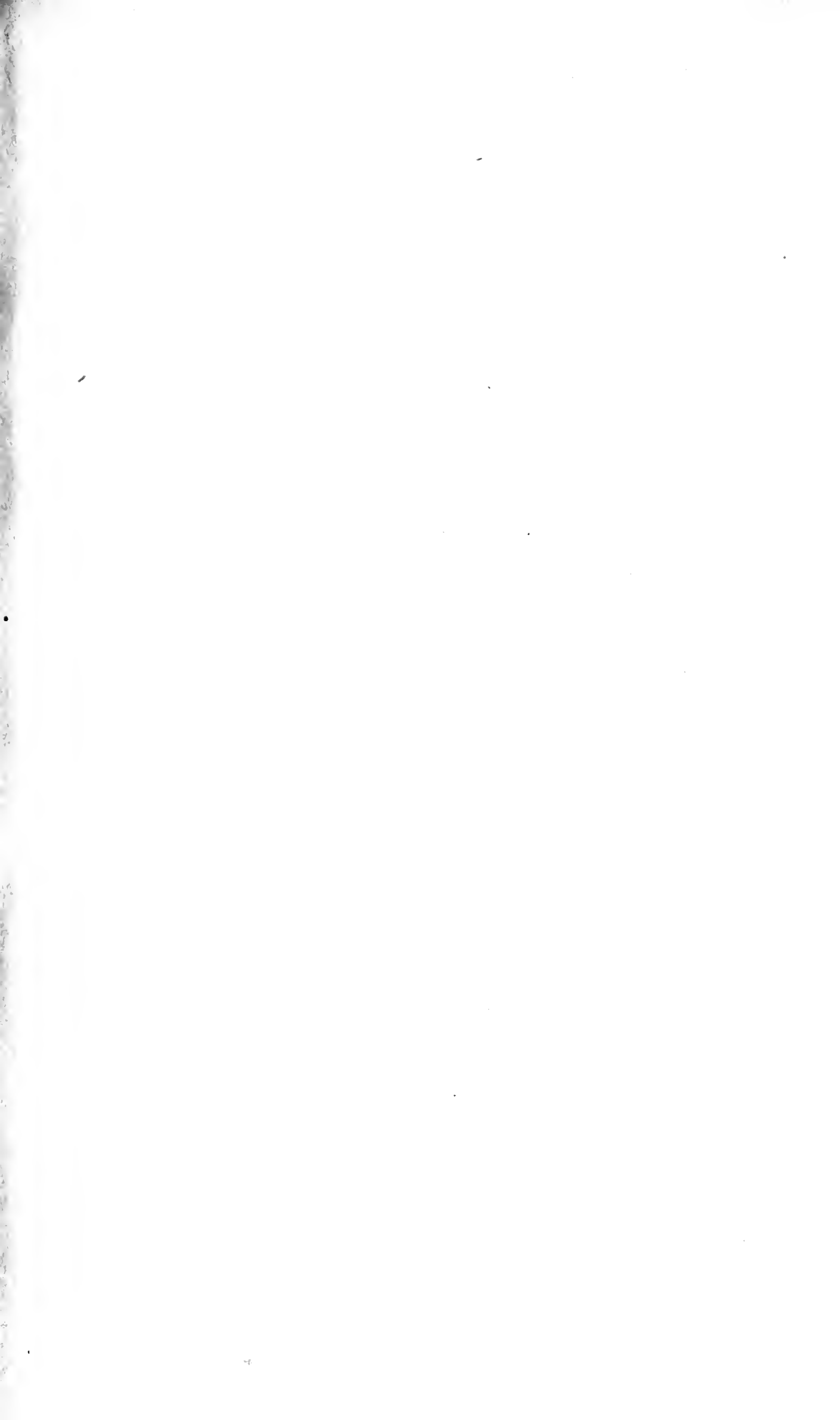
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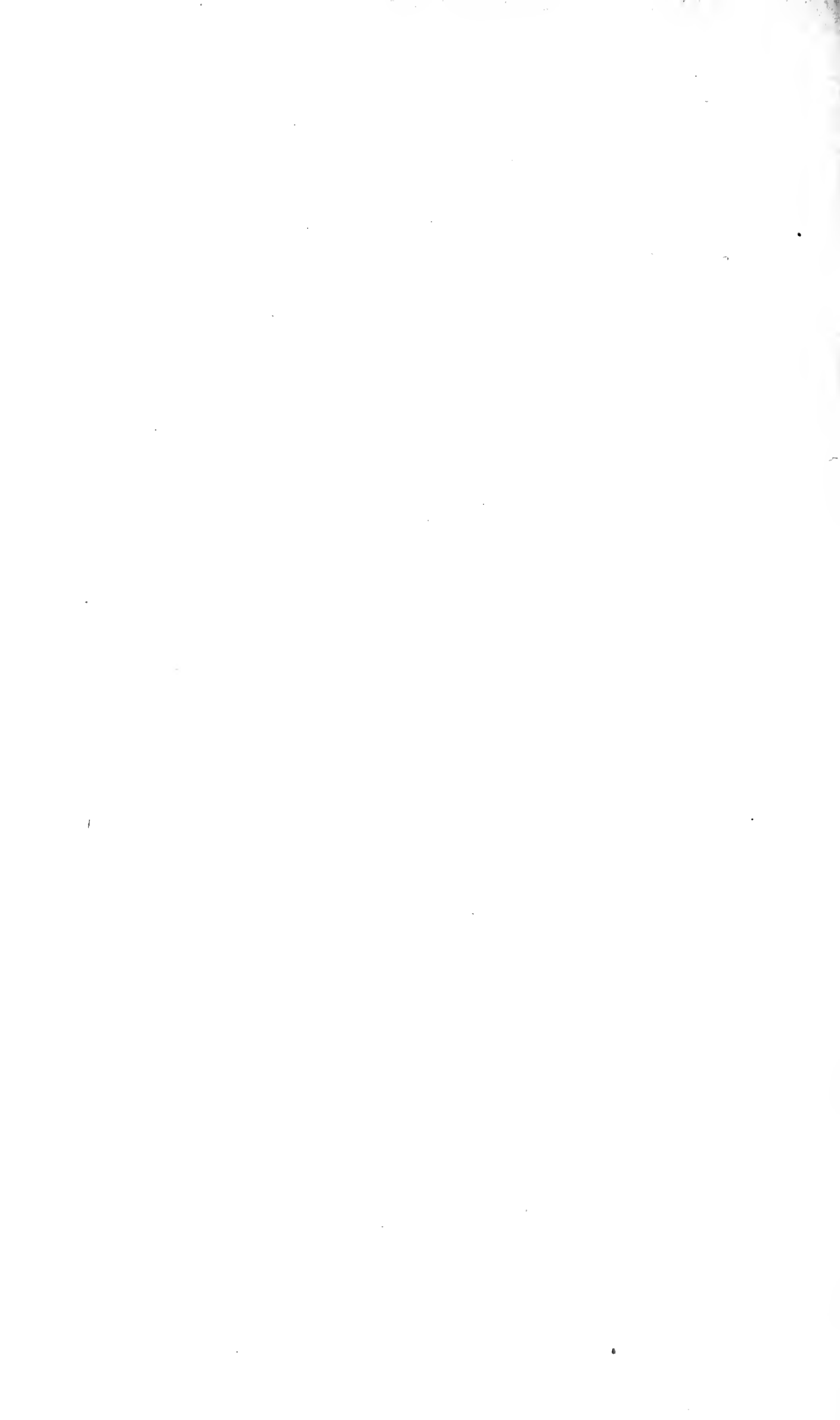


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AFTER THE WAR—WHAT?

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AN ADDRESS BY

STOCKTON AXSON

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, RICE INSTITUTE
HOUSTON, TEXAS

AT THE DINNER AND RECEPTION
GIVEN BY THE UNIVERSITY CLUB, SAN FRANCISCO
TO THE SUMMER SESSION FACULTY OF THE
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NO. 101
ANNEX 1A

After the War—What?

I AM like the Irishman who rode in a sedan chair without a bottom and said that "except for the honor of the thing he would rather have walked." Though I appreciate the distinction of being asked to speak here this evening, I should prefer to remain silent, for what can I say that will be of interest to you? I am sure you gentlemen do not want to hear a lecture on literature, and I cannot tell you all about education, because there are two or three things about education which I have not yet found out myself.

What is there to talk about except the one thing we are all thinking about—the war? And anything that I can say about the war must impress you in one of two ways: either bromidically familiar, as talk about the weather, or something with which you fundamentally disagree. It is to those who disagree that I chiefly address my words, for I very earnestly believe the things I am about to say.

Frankly, what I have to say is from the point of view of an idealist. Some will think that this is equivalent to a confession that what I have to say is, on the face of it, impractical. But I profoundly believe that if the world is to be saved at all, it is to be saved

by putting into practise some things which have long been called impractical. The world has been wrecked on the hard rocks of the "practical;" it is time to patch up the old vessel and put to open sea, on the boundless, fathomless, untried waters of the ideal.

Concerning war in general, my own thoughts are precisely what they were four years ago—that it is a dreadful thing, and a thing to be rendered unnecessary just as soon as possible. I do not know how you gentlemen feel about this particular war in which the world is now engaged, but I tell you quite frankly that I do not thrill over it at all. I see it as one unmitigated tragedy.

Of course, I am not a pacifist. I say "of course," because I assume you credit me with a little intelligence, else you would not have invited me to speak here this evening, and pacifism at this juncture is unintelligent. The war is on. There is nothing to do now but to go through with it. It is now too late for pacifism—and too early.

When a hornet has planted himself in my cuticle I have no time to discuss Shelley's pretty idea that the poor little insect does not mean any harm; what is interesting me is not his intentions but his accomplishments. When a mad dog has broken loose on a community, the citizens have no time to hold a debate on

the question whether the dog is responsible for what is happening, or whether a germ has unfortunately got into his brain. The center of attention is the dog, not the germ.

I am not a pacifist, because I know that the only way to get peace now is to beat Germany until she cries "Enough!"—to beat her until she really means "enough" with that only sincerity of which she is capable—a sincere desire to end her own misery.

We want to hear from Germany a sincere proposal for peace, not a repetition of her previous hypocrisies, her puerile attempts to make it appear that the Allies, and not she, are responsible for continuing the war. We want from her the expression of a genuine and heartfelt desire for peace for her own sake, and an intimation that she is ready to come to terms—terms, I trust, very little of her own making. Her previous proposals have merely reëmphasized her muddle-headedness—her assumption that anybody else was so muddle-headed as to be deceived by the clumsy ruse.

Germany makes war with intelligence and effectiveness that are amazing, but outside of war, in diplomacy, her mental processes are ludicrous—resemble the stupid obliquities of a defective child. This is not strange, for mental derangement frequently follows moral de-

linquency. There was a time when the world looked to Germany for philosophy, but that time ended when Germany permitted herself to be exploited by war lords, and became obsessed with one evil idea to which she subordinated all philosophy, as well as all humane considerations. Once started on that road, Germany went the inevitable way to moral ruin, and now presents the spectacle of a crazed giant, fighting with the furious strength of a maniac, and at the same time babbling the imbecile incoherences of a paretic.

There can be no real peace until Germany is brought to her senses, and there is only one way to do that, by the methods adopted in the violent wards of insane asylums. Germany has ceased to understand any other language. I love peace so much that I want this war prosecuted to such a finish that henceforth those who do not love peace will be extremely careful about "starting anything." The superintendent of a rescue mission for men told me recently: "It isn't all praying down here at this mission. Sometimes we have to knock them down first and pray over them afterwards." Militant religion is religion alive. I want to see a peace so militant that no helmeted and booted kaiser is going to trifle with it.

At present, the soldiers are all that count.

Talk is useless. But when the war ends and statesmen begin the work of reconstruction, I hope it will be begun in a new spirit. I want to see a new world emerge from this war—a world built up on a set of ideas quite different from many of the old ideas. If we cannot get that much out of this great tragedy, then may God help us, for we are pitiful fools.

I have just said that I am not a pacifist, but I am certainly not the sort of anti-pacifist who runs so tumultuously into print nowadays. The latest of these to come to my notice is Francis J. Oppenheimer, who writes a piece for the magazine which he calls "The Failure of Pacifism." The failure of pacifism is not half so obvious as Mr. Oppenheimer's failure to make his points. The trouble with the Oppenheimer type of anti-pacifist is that he has not learned anything from the present war, and he who cannot learn from this war is unteachable. His is the old-time thesis that war is a decree of fate, a thing which must continue because it is inherent in the nature of things and in human nature. It all resembles the pious cant of former days which objected to lightning rods and vaccine on the ground that God must have intended us sometimes to be shocked by lightning and sometimes to be pitted by smallpox, else he would not have devised such things.

The professional anti-pacifists do not really want peace. The chief obstruction hitherto in the way of peace has been that not enough people wanted it hard enough. My hope and belief is that when this war is over the great majority are going to want peace so passionately that they will find a way to get it. What human beings want with all their hearts they usually find a way to get.

The means and the machinery: that must be worked out with patience in the future. First is the honest *will to peace*; "will to power" plus human ingenuity has produced miraculous enginery of destruction; let people be as hot for peace in the future as they have been for power in the past, and we shall have a constructive enginery. A League To Enforce Peace seems to be the most plausible suggestion thus far made—the nations combined to use their force for a new purpose, to keep the peace—and yet no such new idea either, for it has long been in practise in the municipal police force.

Whatever the means and the machinery, the all-important thing is the spirit behind it. Because that spirit was absent in the past we have the monstrosities of the present. A few obvious things are necessary to usher in this new spirit:

First of all is this honest and burning and

militant desire for peace, about which I have been talking.

Secondly, is an international morality approximating individual morality, which does not mean the morality of archangels, but means quite ordinary, every-day morality, merely a recognition of other people's rights and our own respect for those rights. To a considerable degree, we have already taken over that individual morality idea into our business relations, have combined coöperation with competition, have substituted a reasonable degree of honesty and fair dealing for the old cut-throat methods, and have done this not from any motive of cloud-treading altruism, but simply because we found that this was the only way to live and do business comfortably.

A third thing necessary to the realization of this new spirit is the reconciliation of the idea of patriotism with the idea of a world-neighborhood. Certainly every man should love his own country most, but that does not mean that in order to love his own country he must hate some other country or group of countries. Again the proposition is so simple as to seem almost trivial in the statement, and yet it is because we have proceeded on the opposite idea, of national hatreds, "natural enemies," and what not, that we have had

perpetual threats of war, finally leading to this present debacle. We have been as false and artificial in our conceptions of patriotism as would be a father who should profess that, in order to love his own children, he must of necessity hate all other children. The true patriotism must be sufficiently intelligent to make room for an understanding of the simple proposition that the modern world has become so inter-related that the welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all.

Such are some of the elements that must enter into this new spirit which is to make a new and better world. In order to bring about the desired end there are two or three things, quite practical things, to which we shall have to give attention:

First, we shall have to clarify our ideas about "national honor," shall have to cease calling that "honor" in a nation which would be blackguardism in an individual. All the nations have been thus guilty in the past, perhaps Germany most of all, but none is innocent. Not all the guilt of starting this war is Germany's. The roots of a great evil spread beyond any single event, far back into an evil past. As a matter of fact, it is of no great importance who started the war; Germany has prosecuted it with such diabolical wickedness that the question of who started it has

become entirely secondary. But back of all special events leading up to the war, there has been this wrong kind of nationalism, this un-intelligent nationalism, which has substituted truculence for decency, and deceit for honest dealing.

In the next place, we should keep always and solemnly in mind what it is that this war is being fought for. Many causes contributed to its origin, many of them base causes, but as the war has proceeded the world has been sobered, and it has become apparent that, in the providence of events, this war turns out to be a titanic struggle to free human society, once and for all, from the ambitious manipulations of a few autocrats. It is precisely this aspect of the war which lends a solemn grandeur to the otherwise intolerable tragedy—that it is a fight to end forever the conditions that made this war possible, that it is a fight “to make the world safe for democracy.” We must bear that consciously in mind every day and every hour, and never be seduced, even momentarily, into the heresy that we are in this war for some national advantage. The whole glory of our position is that we are in it to gain nothing except that which we had before the war began—the right to live and govern ourselves as a free people; and that we are in this war for the purpose of guaran-

teeing this same right to all other nations—to Germany herself in the end.

In the third place, we should teach a different sort of history in our schools—a more truthful history. We have been pitifully timid in both our morality and our patriotism, garnishing both with palpable lies for fear our children might not be moral and patriotic. Instead of a straightforward and truthful account of the really noble story of America, we have served the children with Jingoistic boastful lies, have told them the story of the American Revolution as if it were a cheap photomelodramá, painting all Americans snow-white, all British ink-black. We would do well to introduce into our school history the modern tendency toward verity in our better drama. Of course, it is easier to paint black villains and white saints than to draw true portraits, but the harder thing is the better worth doing. Besides, what really happened in the Revolution is such an honorable story that it makes better reading and better morality than our timid lies. It is not necessary to keep on telling lies about America. America stands the light of truth exceedingly well.

Finally, gentlemen, there is one other thing that is necessary, and it is a strange thing to talk about at a Smoker, but what I have to say is incomplete unless I mention it. I have

been saying that the world needs a new spirit, but what the world really needs is the renewal of an old spirit, the spirit of Christ. Not a theological Christ, but that spirit of the universe which puts righteousness before glory, and the love of man alongside the love of God; that spirit which does not circumscribe brethren in national boundary lines, but calls every man "brother." The "new" thing that I have been talking about is really a very *old* thing, so old that men had forgotten all about it. It is the thing which, as I understand it, is referred to in the first chapter of the gospel of St. John: "In the *beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God." My whole contention is that there is little hope for the world unless we pause, and remember, and understand, and get back to first principles. As this same chapter of the Bible says in continuance: "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness *comprehended it not.*"

My bitterness against Germany is due to this—that she has substituted death for "life," and darkness for "light," and has been the least "comprehending" of all the nations—in short, that she has violated, and flagrantly violated, every principle of *rightness*, as I understand rightness.

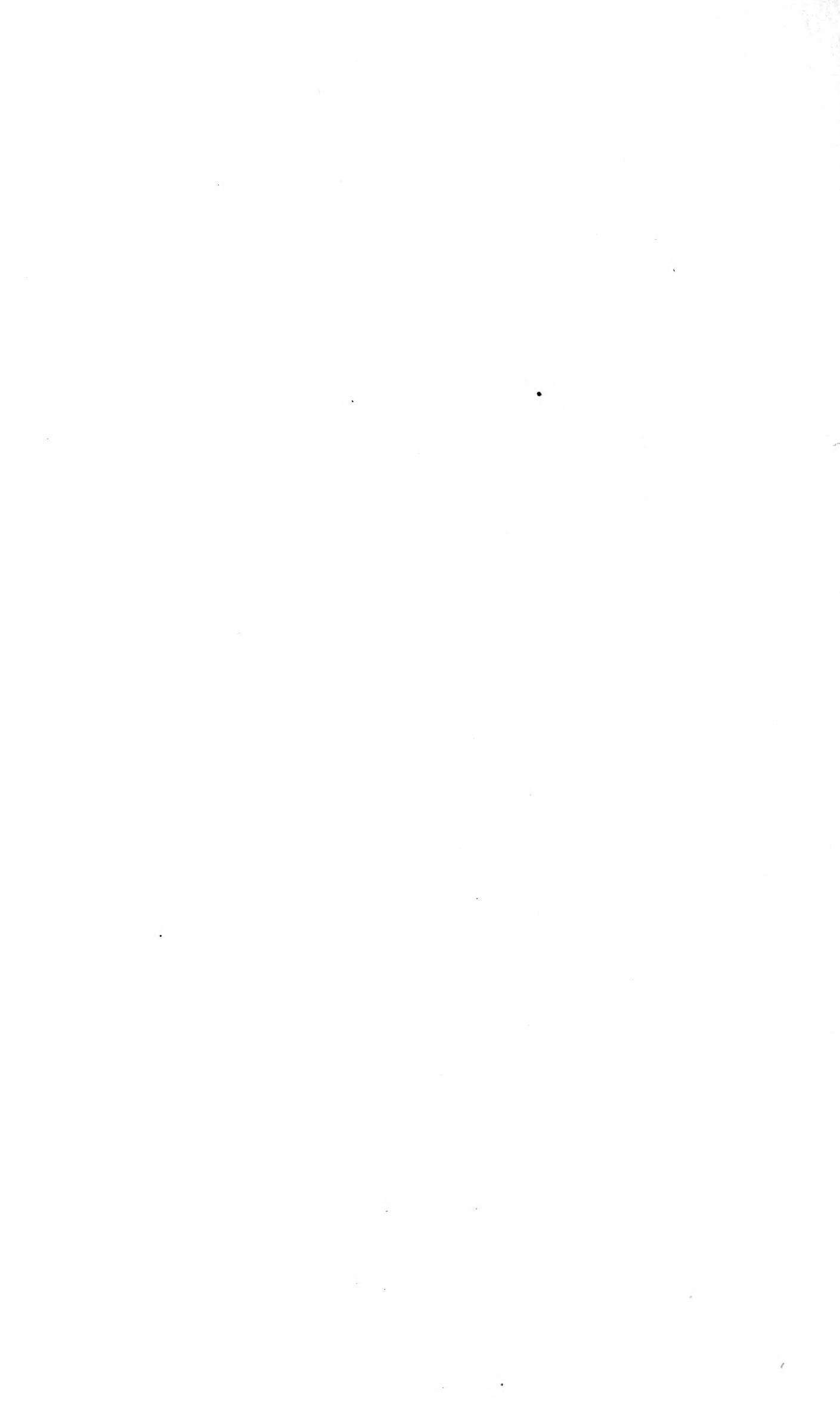
But when I pause to reflect, I realize that it is not Germany as a whole which has done this, but a few autocrats and bureaucrats, who have been able to seduce and betray a whole nation until she has temporarily lost the clear spiritual vision she once had. In all history no such rape was ever committed before, and with such appalling results. When day breaks upon this frantic night of outrage, surely, of all nations, bewildered Germany herself will be most aghast when she realizes what has been done to her. In all this work of liberation no nation will be so much liberated as Germany, for none has had so much to be liberated from. Belgium was tied hand and foot and scored all over with cruel wounds, but the soul of Belgium was untouched. It is the tragedy of Germany that they who got power over her betrayed not her body only, but her soul. There is no deeper tragedy than that.



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