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JOHN MASEFIELD

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"All of life is material for his seeing eye and his thinking heart,
as he makes the wonderful familiar and the familiar wonderful"

EDWIN MARKHAM





J. Mansfield,

JOHN MASEFIELD

SECURE in a high place in the ranks of English writers, John Masefield has attained that enviable position through various means. He is distinguished not alone as a poet, but also as dramatist, historian, novelist, and writer of short stories. But it is as a poet, and particularly as a narrative poet, that he gained his first and perhaps most lasting fame.

John Masefield was born in Ledbury, Herefordshire, on June 1, 1878. Both his father and mother died while he was still a young boy, and with the other Masefield children he went to live at the home of an aunt in Ledbury. Here he grew up, attending the local school. While still a young boy he evinced a strong proclivity for adventure. Tramping the countryside and roaming the woods appealed to him more than studying indoors. In an endeavor to curb his venturesome spirit he was indentured, when fourteen years of age, to a merchant ship. Then began the experiences that so vividly burned themselves into the memory of the restless, sensitive youth. For several years he sailed the sea to many parts of the world, visiting strange lands, always storing up impressions that later were to help him on his way to fame.

The desire to write had always been with him. When ten years old he had read Sir Walter Scott's poems and Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, and at fourteen was deep in Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*. These became his favorite poems, and he wrote some imitations of them. During his time at sea he had little opportunity to read or write, so he left the service when not yet seventeen years old, and in April, 1895, landed in New York, with five dollars, his clothes, and a deep yearning for a literary career. Soon he was domiciled in a garret in Greenwich Village, subsisting on the fare provided through his meagre earnings in any odd jobs he could secure. Among

these were work in a bakery, a livery stable, along the waterfront, and the widely celebrated term of a few months in a saloon near Jefferson Market.

A chance acquaintance with the owner of a carpet factory in Yonkers, New York, led to a position there, and the next two years were happy ones, as they gave security from want and time for reading. A book shop in the town was a favored haunt of his, and every Friday, which was pay day, he bought new books. In speaking of this period he has said, "I did not begin to read poetry with passion and system until 1896. I was living then in Yonkers, New York (at 8 Maple Street). Chaucer was the poet, and the *Parliament of Fowls* the poem of my conversion. I read the *Parliament* all through one Sunday afternoon, with the feeling that I had been kept out of my inheritance and had suddenly entered upon it, and had found it a new world of wonder and delight. I had never realized, until then, what poetry could be. After that Sunday afternoon I read many poets (Chaucer, Keats, Shelley, Milton, and Shakespeare, more than others) and wrote many imitations of them. About a year later, when I was living in London, I wrote two or three of the verses now printed in SALT WATER BALLADS."

Masefield's intimate association with sailors and longshoremen had given him a deep insight into their lives, and it was as their laureate that he began his career of letters. SALT WATER BALLADS opens with a "A Consecration," in which he announces himself as champion of "the dust and the scum of the earth."

"Theirs be the music, the colour, the glory, the gold,
Mine be a handful of ashes, a mouthful of mould
Of the maimed, of the halt and the blind in the rain and the
cold

Of these shall my songs be fashioned, my tales be told."

Some of the poems in this book are now known the world over — especially "Cargoes" and the oft-quoted "Sea-Fever."

"I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the
sky

And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by."

SALT WATER BALLADS was published in England in 1902. Several years' strenuous apprenticeship in literary London had preceded its appearance. The book won him his first recognition. Its unusual quality was praised by leading writers, particularly among the modernist group.

A summer in Devonshire with William Butler Yeats gave him encouragement and inspiration. Soon he was publishing verse and plays that brought him into favor. In 1903 he married Constance de la Cherois-Crommelin.

His first book of prose, A MAINSAIL HAUL, appeared in 1905. This is a collection of dramatic tales of ships and sailors and strange superstitions. "Roistering, reckless rogues swagger in picturesque procession across the pages of John Masefield's A MAINSAIL HAUL. Incorporated in these tales is everything of fear and fascination that men have found in the sea since the sailing of ships began," wrote the reviewer in the *Toledo Blade* when the book was reissued in 1925.

In the same year was published his SEA LIFE IN NELSON'S TIME, an historical account of the rigorous days in the British Navy during the latter years of Nelson's career. Fascinating illustrations picturing the ships of the



From "Sea Life in Nelson's Time"

period add to the value of the book. This was followed by *ON THE SPANISH MAIN OR SOME ENGLISH FORAYS ON THE ISTHMUS OF DARIEN*, which tells of stirring exploits of British seamen under Drake. For some years these books were not available in the United States, but recently a supply was imported, and the books were warmly welcomed by the reviewers and the collectors of Masefield's writings. He spent many months of intensive research in British maritime history before writing these books.

CAPTAIN MARGARET (1908), Masefield's first novel, found wide favor. The poetical quality which distinguishes his prose gives a sustained magnificence throughout this book. The story tells of Charles Margaret, a gallant English gentleman and poet, owner of the sloop *Broken Heart* — so named from his disappointment in love — and the thrilling adventures encountered after sheltering his lost love and her criminal husband on board his boat.

In 1909 came *MULTITUDE AND SOLITUDE*, another novel of rich and beautiful prose. "London was about to take its hour of quiet. Only the poets, the scholars, and the idlers were awake now. In a little while the May dawn would begin. Even now it was tingeing the cherry blossoms of Aleppo. The roses of Sarvistan were spilling in the heat, the blades of green corn by Troy gleamed above the river as the wind shook them." And again "Pink cranes stood in the shallows. Slowly one of them rose aloft, heartily flagging. Another arose, then another, till they made a pinkish ribbon against the forest." From London to Africa we follow the hero in his search for a cure for sleeping sickness. Weird experiences are encountered. Masefield's description in this book of a tropical storm has been acclaimed as one of the most thrilling in all literature.

Several tales of adventure followed, among them *LOST ENDEAVOR* (1909), which recounts romantic deeds in far-away lands, of the sea and buccaneers along the Spanish Main.

At this time he was also experimenting with the drama, and in 1909 *THE TRAGEDY OF NAN*, a poignant, powerful play

in three acts, was published. Many critics have agreed that this is a masterpiece. It is an intense portrayal of tragic events in the life of simple country folk, and has been successfully performed in England. In his preface to the play Masefield says: "Tragedy at its best is a vision of the heart of life. The heart of life can only be laid bare in the agony and exultation of dreadful acts. The vision of agony or spiritual contest pushed beyond the limits of the dying personality is exalting and cleansing. It is only by such vision that a multitude can be brought to the passionate knowledge of things exulting and eternal." *THE CAMPDEN WONDER* and *MRS. HARRISON*, sombre tragedies of a gruesome nature; *THE SWEEPS OF NINETY EIGHT*, a little rebel comedy; and *THE LOCKED CHEST*, favorite one-act plays for amateur productions, were written and performed at this time.

In 1910 *THE TRAGEDY OF POMPEY THE GREAT* appeared. Tense in situation and impressive in its poetry, it conveys Masefield's genius in the handling of the dramatic form. "He is no statuesque Pompey, spouting prose lines masquerading as poetry; Masefield has given us Pompey the man," wrote a reviewer.

But it was in 1911 that John Masefield startled England and occasioned intense excitement and hot discussion over his now world-famous poem, *THE EVERLASTING MERCY*. Telling of this event, W. H. Hamilton, in his critical study of John Masefield, writes: "I shall never forget the torrid day in 1911 when I languidly picked up a blue-covered copy of the *English Review* in a smoker-room, sank with it into a basket-chair, lit my pipe, leisurely opened the magazine, and got one of the shocks and surprises of my life. . . . The 'room was sudden with horror.' At first we gasped 'Oh! What blasphemy! What indecency! Phew!' Then, dazed and unbelieving, one read the poem again — and again — and again. It began to dawn on us . . . that here was one more of the world's great, sudden original poems and one of the greatest religious poems ever born." Vivid and powerful, written in virile, at times lurid,

language, *THE EVERLASTING MERCY* tells the story of Saul Kane, drunkard and poacher, his spiritual revolt and final conversion. Recalling the inception of the poem, Masefield said: "*THE EVERLASTING MERCY* began to form images in my mind early in the morning of a fine day in May, 1911. I had risen very early and had gone out into the morning with a friend who had to ride to catch a train some miles away. On our way down a lane in the freshness and brightness of the dew we saw coming towards us, up a slope in a field close to us, a plough team of noble horses followed by the advancing breaking wave of red clay thrust aside by the share. The ploughman was like Piers Plowman or Chaucer's ploughman, a staid, elderly, honest, and most kindly man whom we had long known and respected. The beauty and nobility of this sight moved me profoundly all day long." That night he began the poem. It marked a rebellion from the contemporary spiritless poetry, and it won for Masefield the Edmond de Polignac prize of five hundred pounds and world-wide recognition. It was his first book to be published in America.

Closely following *THE EVERLASTING MERCY* came *THE WIDOW IN THE BYE STREET*, written in much the same iconoclastic manner. It tells a tragic tale of Widow Gurney, whose son, Jimmy, is hanged for murder, causing her to lose her reason. Of these two remarkable poems Masefield tells us: "In *THE EVERLASTING MERCY* a violent man is made happy; in *THE WIDOW IN THE BYE STREET* a good woman is made unhappy. In neither case does the event fall by merit or demerit, but by the workings of Fate, which come into human affairs with the effect of justice done, for reasons not apparent to us."

In 1913 he again aroused the enthusiasm and acclaim of the critics. This time with *DAUBER* — that magnificent "spiritual vision of life." " 'Dauber' is a great poem. Great because of its pictures of the storm, the sea-night, the ship entering the calm bay at day-dawn. But great also as a book of revelation; as a book of intense, terrible, pitiful heroic vision; as a sensitive record of the sea, full of the bright face of danger, the endurance



From "Salt Water Poems and Ballads"

of ships, the endurance of men." The poem tells of a painter whose heart's desire is to portray the sea as it really is.

"It's not been done, the sea, not yet been done,
From the inside by one who really knows
I'd give up all if I could be the one."

A fall from the masthead kills him before he fulfills his mission. Masefield tells us that the poem is based on fact, and "Thinking of him after many years, he seems to me to be typical of the artist, who in every age will obey the laws of his being and speak his message, in spite of every disadvantage, and in contempt of death." This poem, his famous "Biography," and other favorite verses were published in the United States in the volume *THE STORY OF A ROUND HOUSE*.

THE DAFFODIL FIELDS, his next long narrative poem, recounts a story of the tragic love of two men for the same woman. There are pages of particularly beautiful descriptions of the English countryside. "It always seems to me a most moving thing that natural beauty, the running water, the coming of the flowers of the spring, and the singing of birds should go on year after year with so little apparent change and with so little apparent passion while men change and do themselves such wrong in the same scene and subject to the same season," Masefield says, in speaking of the poem which so beautifully portrays the contrast of man's turbulent spirit with the serene beauty of nature.

PHILIP THE KING AND OTHER POEMS came in 1914. The bringing of the news of the ruin of the Armada to King Philip II of Spain is the theme of the short play, *PHILIP THE KING*. "It is one of the noblest expressions of refined patriotism in our literature, and along with 'The Wanderer,' 'Ships,' 'Biography,' it stands at the head of all the verse literature of the glory of ships." "August, 1914," that most memorable of war poems, is included in this volume.

In 1915 *THE FAITHFUL*, a three-act tragedy, appeared. It is based on episodes in Japanese history at the beginning of the eighteenth century, which have been brought together into

a legend known as the forty-seven Ronin. Masfield keeps closely to the simple and dramatic situations of the original story. It is permeated with a heroic, Greek-like quality, and numerous critics consider it the best of Masfield's plays.

GOOD FRIDAY, a dramatic poem telling of the Passion of Jesus, is characterized by dignity and simple beauty. The volume containing this play includes also a number of his best loved sonnets. This one-act play has been presented annually for the past three years on Palm Sunday by members of the Union Congregational Church in Boston. It was published in 1916.

The same year gave to the world the imperishable GALLIPOLI, that poignantly sad and so vividly realistic saga of the Dardanelles campaign — "Not as a tragedy nor as a mistake, but as a great human effort, which came, more than once, very



From "Gallipoli"

near to triumph, achieved the impossible many times, and failed in the end, as many great deeds of arms have failed from something which had nothing to do with arms nor with the men who bore them." The thirteenth edition of the book was published in 1925, which surely is an indication of the precious quality of this eloquent tribute to the 38,000 Englishmen who

lie buried in Gallipoli. "GALLIPOLI is a book to strike the critical faculty numb and hush the heart of the hearer. For an age — aye, forever on the earth, so far as we can dream it — it will be read and gloried in afresh, and heads will be bowed and tears of strong men shed at every telling. It is as yet too sacred for applause," wrote W. H. Hamilton.

In *THE OLD FRONT LINE* (1917) he gives us a graphic account of the front as it was when the Battle of the Somme began. Through his active service with the Red Cross, Masefield came into direct contact with the realism of war, and his descriptions are vivid and gripping. The early days of the War can be relived through this book. As in *GALLIPOLI*, there are innumerable interesting illustrations.

In the spring of 1918 John Masefield came to America as an emissary for his country, and two speeches delivered at that time are contained in *THE WAR AND THE FUTURE* — one with that title and the other "St. George and the Dragon." Many anecdotes enliven the vivid descriptions of the war. In each he pleads for special coöperation between England and America.

LOLLINGDOWN DOWNS (1918), a title given because most of the poems contained in it were written at that place, includes the famous series of lyrics and sonnets that many consider Masefield's profoundest work.

With the close of the War, a new Masefield appeared. The year 1919 saw the publication of *REYNARD THE FOX*, that flashing record of a hunt which stirs the blood of every reader, whether he has ever ridden to the hounds or not. Here is England, her people, and her dearest sport, sung in swinging, almost perfect verse. "I wrote *REYNARD THE FOX* partly because the events of a fox hunt have been for some centuries the deepest pleasure in English country life, and partly because the fox hunt brings together on terms of equality all sorts and conditions of the English people. Hunting makes more people happy than anything I know." The quarto edition, with its colored plates and many line drawings, is a proud book in many collections.



From "Reynard the Fox"

RIGHT ROYAL, a poem about a steeplechase, followed during the next year. It concerns the subtle relation between horse and rider which, in moments of excitement, in the race, the hunt, or even the panic, makes them curiously one. "Will he win?" The reader queries anxiously, as the poem keeps him fascinated from the beginning to the end.

Right Royal went past him, half an inch, half a head,
Half a neck, he was leading, for an instant he led —

From line to line the reader follows breathlessly. There is also

a special edition of this book, containing innumerable line drawings and several colored plates, which is a favorite with collectors.



From "Right Royal"

ENSLAVED AND OTHER POEMS, published in 1920, contains some of Masefield's most admired verse. ENSLAVED tells a romantic tale beginning —

All early in the April when daylight comes at five
I went into the garden most glad to be alive
The thrushes and the black birds were singing in the thorn
The April flowers were singing for the joy of being born

Then a swift turn to tragic events; the courageous lover willingly joining the galley slaves of the Algerian pirates to be near his captured beloved one; his thrilling rescue of her from the Khalif's harem; and their return to England —

All early in the Maytime when daylight comes at four
We blessed the hawthorne blossom that welcomed us ashore
O beautiful in this living that passes like the foam
It is to go with sorrow and come with beauty home.

"The Hounds of Hell," that weird story of the saint who fought the powers of darkness; "Cap on Head," another strange

folk-tale of diabolical meddlings in human affairs; some more of his beautiful sonnets and short poems, among them the lovely "On Growing Old," are included in this volume.

Be with me Beauty for the fire is dying,
My dog and I are old, too old for roving
Man, whose young passion sets the spindrift flying
Is soon too lame to march, too cold for loving . . .

* * * *

So from this glittering world with all its fashion
Its fire and play of men, its stir, its march,
Let me have Wisdom, Beauty, Wisdom and Passion,
Bread to the soul where the summers parch
Give me but these, and though the darkness close
Even the night will blossom as the rose.

In 1921 came KING COLE, a delightful story of circus life in a poem of quiet beauty and singular charm. Masefield has the legendary King Cole return as a spiritual force to help a struggling circus folk. "In my poem I made him help a travelling circus, because I feel that the duty of Kingship is to encourage all the arts which add joy to life. In the circus, it seems to me that one finds all the elements of the noble arts, based, as they must be, on physical development, a lively sense of life, and a kindling, compelling quality of personality. Circus artists are true artists. They live apart in hardship and anxiety in order to do the artist's task, which is to awaken a sense of life in their fellows."

THE DREAM AND OTHER POEMS (1922) contains the poet's beautiful tribute to his friend, the late Charles Daniel, for many years Provost of Worcester College, Oxford. The title poem, Masefield tells us, is based on an actual dream.

Again Masefield returned to the field of drama, and during the next few years several plays, marked with his peculiar power of beautiful interpretation, were published. ESTHER and BERENICE — two of these plays — are based on Racine's immortal tragedies. "Here in the interpretation through the medium of an alien tongue of the music and ideals of one poet by another, we have that transformation which is the object but too often

the despair of translation. The result is two great plays," said the *New York Times*.

Another poetic drama based on a biblical theme is *A KING'S DAUGHTER*, which tells the story of Jezebel, Queen of Samaria. It is written in blank verse of unusual effectiveness and vigor. The play was successfully performed by the Boar Hill Players at Oxford.

MELLONEY HOLTSPUR, OR THE PANGS OF LOVE is a four-act drama built on the romantic plot "the sins of the father are visited on the children." A mystical intermingling of the ghosts of one generation with their living descendants makes the play one of absorbing interest.

In 1924 was published *THE TAKING OF HELEN*, a story of Helen's flight with Paris, but uses Nireus, a friend of Paris who also is in love with Helen, as the central figure. It is written in prose of particular beauty. An essay on "Play Writing," in which he discusses dramatic composition, with special reference to the Greek play and the English play; some passages from his letters and his essay on "Fox Hunting" are included in the volume.

A SAILOR'S GARLAND, a most pleasing anthology of sea verse, which contains poems from Chaucer to the poets of today, was edited by Masefield. Many famous chanteys are included. Although published some time ago in England, the book was imported but recently.

THE TRIAL OF JESUS (1925) is a three-act drama in which Masefield depicts the trial and condemnation of Jesus, opening in the garden of Gethsemane with the betrayal by Judas and closing with a description of Christ's death. "The sincerity of purpose, solemnity of tone, and majesty of movement manifest in his writing is well in keeping with the subject he has chosen. The choruses which begin the play and end each act are well calculated to raise the audience spiritually and place them in the proper mood for an acceptance of the divine origin and superhuman powers of Christ."

In 1925 came Masefield's first novel in fourteen years.

A thrilling, romantic tale entitled *SARD HARKER*. Of this book the *New York Times* said: "It is written with verve and salt. It has the relish for rough life and the gusts of Smollet. Life has been poured into the pages of this book in beautiful prose, in which Masfield has caught up the clash of human passion and the loveliness and fierce beauty of nature."



From "The Dream"

The year 1926 brought another novel, an equally stirring story entitled *ODTAA*. "In his prose romances John Masfield has developed such a genre as never was on land or sea. Obscure fears one by one take form with the vividness, the swiftness, the continuity of a nightmare, the unseen fear in the forest, felt by horse and by rider, the fear of dead men coming back,

of being locked up when fire is approaching, of being caught — all these fears shot through with the familiar dread of not getting to a place on time. . . . So real in fact do the characters, the scenes, the republic itself become that they seem to bear witness against the author's own signed statement: 'The persons and events described in this story are imaginary,' " — wrote the reviewer in the *Chicago Daily News*.



John Masefield and his daughter Judith

Whatever the future years may give us from the pen of John Masefield, lasting fame has already been won. Eloquent

evidence of this lies in the tributes which hailed the new collected edition of his POEMS AND PLAYS, in four volumes, published late in 1925. Some of these reviews are appended in this booklet.

Since his marriage in 1903, Masefield has lived in England. His home is now at Boar's Hill, Oxford. He has one son, and one daughter — Judith, who drew the illustrations for KING COLE and THE DREAM. A few years ago he built in his garden a little theatre which seats an audience of about one hundred. Here the Boar Hill Players stage their productions. The theatre is dedicated to poetic drama, the furthering of which is one of Masefield's special interests. Some of his own plays, among them THE TRIAL OF JESUS, have been performed there.

Describing the poet, Mr. Gerald Cumberland wrote of him in 1918: "John Masefield has an invincible picturesqueness — picturesqueness that stamps him at once as different from his fellows. He is tall, straight, and blue-eyed, with a complexion as clear as a child's. His eyes are amazingly shy . . . his manner is shy. You feel his sensitiveness and you admire the dignity that is at once its outcome and protection.

"There are many legends about Masefield — he is the kind of figure that gives rise to legends and, as he is studiously reticent, some of the legends have persisted and have for many persons become true."

But the facts of his life are surely sufficiently picturesque and his poem "Biography" he tells us what he would have us remember.

Men do not heed the rungs by which men climb
Those glittering steps, those milestones upon Time,
Those tombstones of dead selves, those hours of birth,
Those moments of the soul in years of earth
They mark the height achieved, the main result,
The power of freedom in the perished cult,
The power of boredom in the dead man's deeds,
Not the bright moments of the sprinkled seeds.

(from "Biography")



From "Salt Water Poems and Ballads"

IN BEHALF OF JOHN MASEFIELD

By STUART SHERMAN

John Masefield has a grave musical voice, and when, with sharp little gushes of emotion, he reads "The West Wind" and makes one hear his lark singing "above the green wheat," I swear no sweeter song has been sung in my time or more soothing to a tired heart. Why should I not go on and say that I am not ready to sift him yet, because nearly all of his work, perhaps barring the adaptations from Racine, still seems alive?

This lean, sad-eyed master of song-craft, who has plowed Gloucestershire with oxen and the deep sea with ships, has given me more poetic pleasure than any other English poet living. Through his awakened personality I have felt mighty rhythms pulsing through forms of life that dissolve and decay; through waves that break, fields sown and harvested, foiled tragic lovers, hot races ending with blown steeds and fallen horsemen, and forlorn hopes ebbing out in blood-drenched, frost-bitten trenches by the Hellespont. His glorification of the invincible vanquished stirs me, I confess, profoundly. It is the inside story of human life. He tells it with swift, bright speed, and yet with a pathos which bites to the bone.

Without going through any critical processes, I have but to glance at the fifteen volumes which preceded this collected edition to my shelves to see that in the long race of this last twenty-five years Masefield has now for a decade or more been in the lead. My favorites of the old time, Stephen Phillips and John Synge, fell long ago into the blind cave of night. Masefield's immediacy and sincerity and fresh color are unfavorable to most of the others.

* * * *

Of course, I know that John Masefield has had his quarter-century of productivity and his decade of fame, and that it is high time now for him to be slipping off the stage and leaving elbow room for the critics to haul the ascending stars into heaven. I know what the voguish critics are saying — that Masefield began with echoes of Kipling and Synge; that he

spells Beauty with a capital letter; that the introduction of "closly puts" and bar-room oaths into verse is no great feat once the trick has been suggested; that the tragedies are melodramatic through inadequate characterization; that the narratives are prolix; that the verse is padded with moral platitudes; that "lasted" is rhymed with "Bastard," as it is by many speakers; and that throughout the works there is a culpable indifference to the poetic uses of the file, just as there is in the works of the Master of all Makers.

Some of this critical pawing is captious. Masefield's apprentice debt to Kipling in *SALT WATER BALLADS* and to Synge in *THE TRAGEDY OF NAN* was soon stricken off the score. The mature Masefield is nobody's echo. He is a figure as independent and original as any man can be who works, as all the great English poets have done, for the vital continuation of an ancient and splendid tradition. Obviously, he learned his craft of the masters. For the forms and instruments of his music his debt is immense to Burns, Byron, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Chaucer. *THE EVERLASTING MERCY* is, if you please, an English *Tam O'Shanter*; *THE WIDOW IN THE BYE STREET*, a modern *Troilus and Cressida*; *REYNARD THE FOX*, a resuscitation of the *Canterbury Pilgrims*; *DAUBER* is *Childe Harold* or *Don Juan* gone on a fresh pilgrimage; and the chief sonnet sequence carries on the Elizabethan quest for the soul and the divine idea behind the shadows of things. But that a poet suggests such comparisons, while writing with sharp realism of his own times and out of his own experience, marks him not a slave but an heir.

Some of these exceptions, however, are well taken, and Mr. Masefield himself would probably sustain them. In the heat of the race, he has not always avoided knocking the top-rail off the fence. In his brief introduction to this edition, glancing back over the performance of his generations, he says: "Often their work has been harsh, violent, and ill-considered." But their mission, he intimates, was not to gild the refined Tennysonian gold nor to paint the late Victorian lily white. Tennyson himself had kept an even balance between the native English tendency toward a robust rendering of life and the imported cult of artifice and technical finish. His imitators declined into a mere respectability, devoid of poetic courage or hope. The mission of Masefield's generation was to sally boldly into nature and restore vitality by reemphasizing the native qualities: "character-drawing, humor, liveliness, and truth."

Certainly the apologist for Masfield should frankly concede his flaws and foibles to Mr. Squire and other parodists. He should take positive ground and defend him for the passionate expression of his tragic realism, his strength, and his sincerity. An English critic, Dixon Scott, moved to comment by *THE DAFFODIL FIELDS*, began with a protest against the solemnity with which people take their poets. They, the poets, are just like other people, he would have us believe, not a race of "wilted priests," but "simple, jolly, frank, and friendly souls . . . engrossed in the grubby, glorious work of growing flowers." Well, a good many contemporary poets are like that. That is the trouble with their poetry. It is a kind of passionless floriculture. But John Masfield stands out as not in the least like that. Poetry has been in the place of religion to him; and he has served it like a priest — not with a linen ephod, but with Carlyle's "baphometric fire-baptism."

In that interesting novel of his, *MULTITUDE AND SOLITUDE*, there are many cutting observations on contemporary literature, and, in *Roger Naldrett*, there is a portrait of the poet's mind which we may accept as strikingly similar to that of its author. Roger declares that the Celtic love of the beautiful is "all bunkum." He finds the distinctive quality of Irish verse "in that kind of windy impersonality which one hears in their talk." "I maintain," he says, "that the Irish have no imagination. Imagination is a moral quality." Before he settles down to a literary life, Roger wishes to get the whole of himself involved and incandescent in the flame of his imagination. "I begin to think that a writer without character, without high and austere character, in himself, and in the written image of himself, is a panderer, a bawd, a seller of Christ. . . . Good God, Heseltine, it seems to me that a man should not be permitted to write a play before he has risked his life for another, or for the state."

Masfield's long narrative poem, *DAUBER*, is ordinarily praised as a superb picture of the sea. It is that, but it is more than that. It is a superb picture of artistic dedication. It illustrates the author's sense of the means by which a moribund art may live again. Here is a man who desires to paint the "windy, green, unquiet sea," ships scudding before the wind, and the destinies of men whose ways are on the great deep. Nautical pictures he might make from models in his studio. To know the might and mystery of the sea, he must give himself to it as the saint gives himself to God. Three years before the mast,

he hopes, will teach his hand to paint the living truth when he shows the landlubber how billows break and a ship goes up the wave. From the fore-topgallant yard, the dedicated dauber tumbles too soon to his death. But such prices the gods exact of those who mimic the Creator's art.

The point is that with Masefield literature ceases to be hypnotic, a dreamily recreative "escape from life." It becomes a probe to the quick of the spirit, stabbing us "broad awake." It becomes an exultant hymning and glorification of life, even while it rushes on catastrophe. I do not know whether he became a sailor in order to learn to sing, or whether he sang because he had been a sailor. But that fine poem about his great joys, "Biography," is proof enough that the prime sources of his passion were not "literary." He loves the taste of his own days, bitter and sweet, and his physical immersion in experience: swimming, racing, the first glimpse of strange mountains; but heavy labor, too, in quarry and mill, roads tramped in the rain, the rough talk of peasant and sailor, the long road westward through the springing wheat, the comradeship of hard-palmed men following the sea.

Whose feet with mine wore many a bolt head bright
Treading the decks beneath the riding light.

The last line of this poem has been rather often quoted: "The days that make us happy make us wise." There is a good bit of Masefield in it. It is happiness, peace, and beauty which give a man new eyes and put "compassion" into his work. Yes, but reverse the saying and you have the other half of the poet's wisdom: "The days that make us wise make us happy."

In this world, a wise man learns to derive a great part of his happiness from discovering how much misery he can endure, how tough the human heart is, the blows it can take and still fight on, the wounds it can receive and still recover. I doubt whether any living poet save Thomas Hardy has meditated so deeply and so fruitfully on disastrous things as John Masefield.

Among the tragic narratives I have a partiality for *THE WIDOW IN THE BYE STREET*, which many of the commentators rate below its deserts. It is notable for dramatic characterization. The title suggests that the interest centers in the mother, a figure treated with overwhelming pathos, though at the same time with an impartial disclosure of the jealous self-preservative elements in her affection for her son. A case might be made out for the central interest of Anna, who abides with singular



Down Bye Street, in a little Shropshire town,
There lived a widow with her only son :
She had no wealth nor title to renown,
Nor any joyous hours, never one.

From "The Everlasting Mercy and The Window in the Bye Street"

vividness in my memory, dropping her spray of scarlet hips as a signal to Ern, and holding the dazzling light so that he may see to bash in Jimmy's face. Jimmy himself is, to my thinking, a pretty striking piece of characterization.

But there is a fifth person in this "sordid" affair, a fifth unnamed person, "exulting and eternal." She it was who made Jimmy desert his mother; she infatuated him with a harlot, she frenzied his arm to the murderous blow, she brought him to the hangman's noose, and among the ancients she was known as the divine Cytherea. Her defeat in the bloody squalor of these English circumstances was, I believe, for Mr. Masefield, one of the high interests of the occasion. Now many contrasted elements enter into the effect of this complete, symmetrical, and intense narrative — mother-love, lust, jealousy, and murder; but the stinging beauty and terror of it depend, I believe, upon Masefield's vision of the authentic Cytherean casting her illusive radiance over a heartless drab.

This is not Anna, whom he describes, hiding in the pastoral country after the execution of Jimmy — though it has her shape and name. This is the Cytherean illusion:

There, in the April in the garden close,
One heard her in the morning singing sweet,
Calling the birds from the unbudded rose,
Offering her lips with grains for them to eat.
The redbreasts come with little wiry feet,
Sparrows and tits and all wild feathery things,
Brushing her lifted face with quivering wings.

As W. H. Hamilton has pertinently remarked, there is something "fundamental in our poet's insistence upon another than the easy popular verdict on the unsuccessful." In his little book on Shakespeare, Masefield observes the Elizabethan dramatist's brooding sympathy with tragical Kings, such as Richard II, who failed "because they did not conform to a type lower than themselves." Perhaps the idea is a little too subtle or too exalted for our common feeling that virtue resides with the victor and that the justice of a cause is to be gauged by its success.

But this notion of a moral splendor in the dead and defeated, Mr. Masefield pursues through his tragedies: POMPEY THE GREAT, in which the hero has traits of resemblance to Woodrow Wilson; PHILIP THE KING, serene with religious faith after the destruction of the Armada, dismissing the tragic messenger

with the thought: "In bitter days the soul finds God, God us"; the tragedy in Oriental mask, called *THE FAITHFUL*; the noble tragic narrative of *GALLIPOLI*, in which fragments from the *Song of Roland* give the keynote; and so on through the two recent dramas dealing with the invincible "lost cause" of Christ.

To Masefield I think that the most beautiful and exulting thing in the world — the fairest form into which our transitory lives can flame, rushing into darkness — is the courage of men who have been faithful unto death. The heroic thrills him to his heart's core. Yet for him the World War was a long overshadowing agony, lit only by the blazing glory of human endurance. He followed the Red Cross to one of the most desperate battlefields to share its perils and to alleviate its miseries. These lines remind us in what mood men of peace in those days bowed to doom and

sadly rose and left the well loved Downs.
And so by ship to sea; and knew no more
The fields of home, the byres, the market towns,
Nor the dear outline of the English shore.

But knew the misery of the soaking trench,
The freezing in the rigging, the despair
In the revolting second of the wrench
When the blind soul is flung upon the air.

From that tragedy Masefield returned with an immense and desperate compassion for the *animula* — God's waif, the human soul—poor, thin, little tenant of this falling house of flesh, bewildered wanderer among his own juggernauts and thunders, along the roaring abysses of oblivion. The *SONNETS* dedicated "To My American Friends" in 1916 are an intensely realistic expression of a bitter quest, ending in the impersonally consolatory thought that

The sun will rise, the winds that ever move
Will blow our dust, and boy and girl will love.

Since the War Mr. Masefield has, I suspect, steadied himself by leaning heavily on the joy of people who do not think and feel deeply. In *REYNARD THE FOX*, *RIGHT ROYAL* and *KING COLE* — outstanding narrative poems of these later years — friendly critics have hailed a recovery of that fluent, exuberant, creative energy, objective, dramatic, and sensuous, which first astonished and delighted them in *THE EVERLASTING*

MERCY. Here are indeed high spirits and blithe scenes; sunlight and dew on English meadow and woodland; the barking of dogs; the excitement of horses; the pungency of the stable and the reek of the groom's strong pipe on the morning air; jolly, beef-eating, red-coated huntsmen; English girls with roses in their cheeks; jockeys, farmers, hucksters, peasantry — all the countryside — gayly assembling for the old English sports, the fox hunt, the horse race, the travelling circus. Here are the bright speed, the galloping rhythms, the brilliant colors, the odor and zest of ruddy life.

One is tempted to say that the sensitive author of the sonnets and the lyrics, full of haunting cries and gushes of poignant sadness, has tossed his melancholy and the heartbreak of the *animula* into the west wind, and has voided the chamber of his personality in order to fill it with the ancient traditional emotions of the folk. It is one of many signs that John Masefield is a true poet of the taller sort, that he rises to a serene and joyous contemplation of the whole course of the "river of life" streaming down from Chaucer's time — with the eternal rhythm, and the fleeing waters that sparkle and pass. After sharp hunger, passionate seeking, nostalgia of the spirit, and tragic illumination, he has come to the clear high point from which Arnold described the full murmurous flowing of the Oxus to the sea. His personal feeling is discernible in the scene only in the softening of the light and in the almost inaudible undertone of compassion.

Lean'd on his fate, he gazes — tears
Are in his eyes, and in his ears
The murmur of a thousand years.
Before him he sees life unroll,
A placid and continuous whole —
That general life, which does not cease . . .

"Books" *New York Herald Tribune*

RULE BRITANNIA!

By LAURENCE STALLINGS

We learn from time to time that the Englishmen are all dead. Some fomenting soul hints darkly that Anglophiles are poring over English tripe at the reviewing stand. Bennett and Wells and Galsworthy are dead upon their feet; old age has overtaken Hardy; Kipling has pneumonia; and Joseph Conrad is home from the sea.

We also learn that English poetry is now laid low. Housman has quit. Bridges never does anything, and the Sitwells and Huxleys are rightly mad. The young men of England, so it is said, are vainly attempting to fit the glass slipper of Lord Alfred of Victoria upon their feet or wear the clog shoes of T. S. Eliot. And as for the theatre, Shaw alone maintains the tradition, and he an Irishman. The rest are so many Michael Arlens laid hat to hat.

All this being the case, it is disconcerting for John Masefield to dump his collected works upon the unsuspecting and preening American self-esteem. We Americans, one hears everywhere, are on the up-grade in literachoor. We have a hey-nony-nony lilt of virility for new forms, new things, new gods. Then comes another collected edition from England, this time John Masefield's.

Whaddye mean, the English are all dead? Macmillan's sends the Masefield collection down to Park Row. Masefield dead? Masefield isn't nearly through. He has simply collected four volumes of the things he wishes preserved. If it is newness of verse you seek, there's the volume containing *THE WIDOW IN THE BYE STREET* and *THE EVERLASTING MERCY*. If it is excellence in the classic style, you might read again "Be With Me, Beauty, for the Fire Is Dying." If it be drama or plays, you may have your choice between good plays in verse and good plays in prose. For narrative there is *DAUBER* and for the crude, uncut rhythms of verse you may again read *RIGHT ROYAL* or *REYNARD THE FOX*.

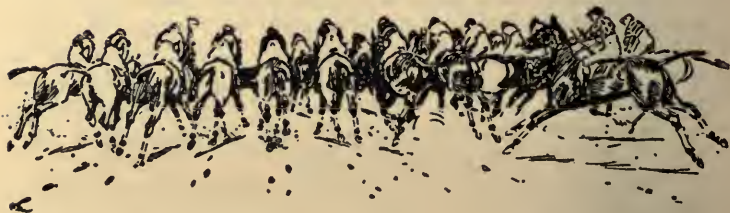
Masefield has not yet included his prose in the collection. His study of *GALLIPOLI* is absent — that long, straight flight of

writing which preserves forever still another crowd of bright and deathless figures on the beaches near Troy. One recalls fugitive other pieces. The English are all worn out and awry? Just so many Cosmo Hamiltons running from WJZ? Ho! Ho! Ho! Stop me if you've heard this one.

I wish to God we had one American who gave the promise of some day living, on a hill somewhere, comparable to Boar's Hill in Oxford, who might dump four volumes of Masefield's stuff down upon this desk. Then there would be another Anglo-phobe following the trail which Sinclair Lewis blazes anew whenever he returns from London, monocle in eye, stars and stripes forever.

It seems to me that Masefield can take his own epitaph from a thought expressed in one of his own prefaces: "It is only by such vision that the multitude can be brought to the passionate knowledge of things exulting and eternal." His stuff is "exulting and eternal" in its essence. That icy climb of Dauber over the futtock shrouds, the flight of the boy in *THE EVER-LASTING MERCY*, the core of Masefield's shorter songs, the penetration in his play of *THE FAITHFUL*, these things are filled with exultation, and they possibly will survive as long as English is read.

—*New York World*



From "Right Royal"

JOHN MASEFIELD'S PLACE IN ENGLISH POETRY

Not until the publication of *THE EVERLASTING MERCY* in the *English Review* in 1911 did the critics prick their ears. No volume of poetry published in this century has made a stir comparable to the effect it produced. From that day poetry took a new lease of life. At the risk of being accused of uttering blasphemy, let it be set down here that this was an event fully as decisive as the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* a century before. *THE EVERLASTING MERCY*, whatever its defects, poured vitality back into English verse. Poetry was again the provoker of hot argument, not merely matter for languid appraisal.

That event, in reality only a few years past, now seems far off. Many new voices have since been raised, both in America and in England. Of them all, to this reviewer, Masefield's is the fullest-toned, the deepest. He has remained sensitive to the tradition of English poetry, but he has never been circumscribed by it. His foundations rest unshakably upon it, but he has done his own building. None knows better than himself how much he owes to the great singers who have preceded him; he does not pose as the beneficiary of a special dispensation. But what he has drawn from them he has made unmistakably his own.

One can think of no other poet since Chaucer so purely English in derivation and in spirit. His intense nationalism has no doubt contributed to the marking down of his talents in some critical quarters, for nationalism nowadays receives a cold scrutiny. Masefield's is of the kind that will not be stared down. Its basis is spiritual, in

. . . the heartfelt things past-speaking dear
To unknown generations of dead men.

Out of that nationalism of his came the noblest utterance in poetry that the War brought forth. If Masefield had written nothing else besides "August, 1914," his name would be remembered among the English poets. No blustering patriot, no facile

glorifier of war, wrote those lines. If men died for love of England they also

. . . died (uncouthly, most) in foreign lands
For some idea but dimly understood
Of an English city never built by hands
Which love of England prompted and made good.

The mood in which Masefield watched the approach of war, as it is here recorded, is not the eager consecration to which young men like Rupert Brooke gave expression. Masefield's poem has lost nothing of its poignancy in the aftermath of disillusion, because it was written from an embracing vision. It does not ennoble war; it merely perceives it as the agency through which men reach down into

The depths and sunken gold of being alive.

Men will give of themselves again as they have before, to the last spurt of energy, to the last drop of blood.

In the idealism of which human nature is capable, whether in blindly serving unworthy ends or not, one finds John Masefield's sympathies always passionately enlisted. That is what gives meaning to his world.

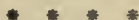
The faithful fool who follows the torn flag,
The woman marching by the beaten man,
Make with their truth atonement for the brag,
And earn a pity for the too proud plan.
For in disaster, in the ruined will,
In the soiled shreds of what the brain conceived,
Something above the wreck is steady still,
Bright above all that cannot be retrieved.
Grandeur of soul, a touching of the star
That good days covered but by which we are.

That is the conviction, this burning belief in the tortured nobility to which human nature can reach, which is at the core of tragedy in his plays, just as it runs through the poems. Whether it be Pompey the Great, going to his death on the shores of Pelusium in Egypt, or the Samurai of *THE FAITHFUL* laying down their lives out of loyalty, the informing spirit is the same.

It is natural that a poet who is deeply sensitive to the potential greatness in human nature should seek ardently for some assurance that man is not playing his part in a meaningless rigmarole. His sequence of sonnets picturing the flow and ebb of vanishing civilizations ends with these lines:

So shall we be; so will our cities lie,
 Unknown beneath the grasses of the Summer,
 Walls without roofs, naves open to the sky,
 Doors open to the wind, the only comer.
 And men will grub the ruins, eyes will peer
 Fingers will grope for pennies, brains will tire
 To chronicle the skills we practiced here,
 While still we breathed the wind and trod the mire.
 O, like the ghost at dawn scared by the cock
 Let us make haste, to let the spirit dive
 Deep in self's sea, until the deeps unlock
 The depths and sunken gold of being alive
 Till, though our Many pass, a something stands
 Aloft through Time that covers all with sands.

Is there another poet in whose work there is combined the fruitful meditation which distinguishes Masfield's sonnets and the impelling flow and graphic sharpness of his narrative verse? He is an extraordinarily versatile poet. Where else among living writers of verse can one find the ancient ballad form recreated as in "The Hounds of Hell" and "Cap on Head," with no loss of the original freshness and dramatic sweep? "Dauber" stands as the best poem of the sea and as one of the best stories of the sea in the English tongue. And he has served the countryside, as well, in REYNARD THE FOX, THE DAFFODIL FIELDS and KING COLE. All the life of an English county stirs in REYNARD THE FOX, and that man's blood is sluggish indeed who can put down the poem without reading through to the finish of the hunt. Here is narrative that flies.



Among all his contemporaries in poetry there is none who has a better chance of survival. If he had been less intelligible, those who complain now of his intellectual content would be better satisfied, but he has chosen to stand with the best poets in his tongue in that also; his simplicity is of the sort that helps to keep poetry remembered and alive. The poetry that springs from emotion, not the intellectual exercise. In that conception of his art John Masfield has been unswerving: the beauty of ships that has moved him, the sea's power, the soul of man fighting in the last ditch — his emotional response to such as these has been finely tempered, of ringing honesty, and fired with the spark that brings a glow to the minds of other men.

—*New York Times Book Review*

"OF THE ELECT"

By ARTHUR GUITERMAN

The tumult and the shouting dies, the critics and their bards depart; John Masefield remains, one of the few who carry on the high tradition of English poetry, a great poet by virtue of a great soul. In his fiftieth year his poems and plays have been collected as *THE COLLECTED WORKS OF JOHN MASEFIELD*, in four volumes, making it easier to arrive at some estimate of the literary achievement of an unusually varied career. In these books there is nothing weak nor petty. We have the lyric vigor and rude mirth of the early *SALT WATER BALLADS*, with the sailor's yearning for the sea and the loveliness of tall ships; the plays and the tragic poems, with their deep feeling for struggling humanity; *REYNARD THE FOX*, with its rich Chaucerian pictures of the English countryside; the later sonnets, with their definite philosophy and melodious charm; and always the understanding sympathy that drives out hatred and the passionate devotion of the seeker for —

that one beauty
God put me here to find.

Great poetry is essential truth revealed in beauty; and poetry is not an exercise for the neurotic, the lazy, nor the mentally deficient. The mind of a true poet should be as logical as that of a mathematician and as clean, vigorous, and well-trained as the body of an athlete; his observation and insight should be as unerring as that of a scientist; and his utterance, with all its graces of diction, should be as clear as that of a mountaineer or a wise child. The great poet, like the great scientist, deals not in "common sense," but in that uncommon sense of a better day. By these tests and more, John Masefield is surely of the elect.

—*The Outlook*

"THE MOST SATISFYING POET"

By JOHN FARRAR

Upon the publication of the complete edition of his poems and plays, I find little new to say about John Masefield. He seems to me by far the most satisfying poet of our time. In its final essence, greatness in poetry, as far as current poets are concerned, is certainly a matter of personal preference. There are those who find, in some of Masefield, swinging rhythms that

mark him for them as "popular." Others belittle him on other grounds. The fact remains that for beauty of form and line, originality of conception, serenity of thought, John Masefield is supreme. He is a more vital poet than Hardy, a more thoughtful poet than Kipling, a more virile poet than Yeats. His great lines are many, and there are many great and memorable poems. As a dramatist, he possesses a quiet depth that is perhaps the mark also of the great poet rather than the dramatic genius; yet there are few finer modern plays than *THE TRAGEDY OF NAN*.
—*The Bookman*



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