

SHAM IDEALISM.

"The most sinister figures of the war are the intellectuals. Their proper part would have been to form the opposition, to preserve, during the war, the things which were of worth in times of peace, or else to be silent. Instead, they are running behind the soldiers, trembling all over, and they are distinguished from the mob only by the vehemence of their cries. People who saw a world collapsing before their eyes did not take twenty-four hours to accept the change. They never dreamed of resisting. The pleasure of learning is something very glorious—but so quickly? These are the people who talk proudly of 'the mobilisation of minds' at the precise moment when they are demobilising minds. Anyone who has himself experienced the sufferings of the war will say to himself, The intellectuals have contented themselves, since the first day of mobilisation, with picturing the war in beautiful colours."

These words were written early this year by a German publicist. I found them in a French Socialist paper. The French editor added his own post-script, which consisted of the question—"Why, when we read these words, do we think of our own intellectuals, and particularly of the most excited of all, the University men?" Australian readers may add their own post-script.

What is the indictment? It is this, that our intellectuals, with few exceptions, are the apostles of a sham idealism. By a sham idealism I mean one which proceeds by distorting the actual. It does so by casting the glamour of the ideals over that which is in its essential nature sordid and bestial. In the moral confusion it thus creates, it becomes the dupe of its own masked words and high-sounding phrases, until it loses hold of reality altogether.

My meaning is not hard to illustrate. Sham idealism is the inspiration of those German writers who have glorified Kultur. It is the Muse of Rudyard Kipling, masking cheap coloured labour, and Congo and Putumayo devilishness, behind such turgid phrases as "the call of the East," or "the white man's burden." This is the process of spiritual self-inflation which Scripture, in its blunt way, describes as "filling one's belly with the east wind." It is a process which is going on all round us at the present time—readers must supply their own local illustrations—in the press, in the pulpit, on the platform.

I am careful to speak of sham idealism, and to insist upon the adjective, because genuine idealism is the breath of life. We live, as Wordsworth says, by admiration, hope and love. But the sort of life we lead depends on the sort of things we admire and hope and love. It is a part of sham idealism to pretend that the only alternatives to its inflated phrases are materialism and cynicism. The truth is that the sham idealist, in so far as he is not the dupe of his own or other people's shoddy phrases, is himself at heart a cynical materialist. His unconscious assumption is that reality is a mean and hollow thing, and life only tolerable to those who intoxicate themselves with

falsehood. His idealism is the sauce piquante which serves to make an insipid dish palatable.

How many times, during these last few years, have we heard men speaking as if, on a certain day in a certain year, life had suddenly, for the first time, become a serious affair, offering at last an opportunity for chivalry, adventure, heroism! We need not wonder too much that those who have most vociferously proclaimed this new revelation have often been the least forward to act upon it. They excuse themselves as solemnly as they preach to others. They are too old for the adventure, too busy for the quest. Not for their shoulders is the burden of the ideal they profess. Ostentatiously they lament the infinite variety of circumstances which imprison their activities in a narrower orbit than that idealism into which their spirits soar with eagles' wings. Into their lives the opportunity has never come. They have never been granted a chance of striking a blow against evil, of lifting hand or voice to smite falsehood and injustice, because, alas! these things are not to be met in their world. What would they not give to have it otherwise!

But a true idealism finds its opportunity always close. The Kingdoms of Heaven and of Hell are among us. "Our stuff is at hand, plastic as we can wish," and we are called to exercise our skill,

"Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us."

It is not that our intellectuals have had no opportunity. It is that they have missed it. Preaching to others a sham idealism, and deluding themselves with it, they have, in fact, taken sides with materialism and cynicism. The challenge to their idealism has come to them as Christ came to the Scribes and Pharisees, as he comes to us all in the garb of the prisoner, the outcast, the poor and despised, and they have not seen. They have responded by taking sides with the strong against the weak, with the rich against the poor, with the popular against the unpopular. They have been expecting, and rehearsing for some grand dramatic moment which has never come. And so they have kept on mouthing the phrases of their shoddy idealism, while the hosts of greed and hatred and injustice were fortifying themselves all about them. In the presence of the profiteer, the Stock Exchange gambler, the unjust judge, the vulgar and lying journalist, the venal politician, the grinder of the faces of the poor, they were silent, or obsequiously deferential. Yet here or nowhere was their America, here or nowhere their chance to spend themselves for an ideal. But here the ideal was clad in too homely and humble a garb for them. They have not learned that this is the way of ideals, and that the beginning of a true idealism is to know it. Let us leave them to their beautiful phrases, and go out in our drab adventure without them. "We shall march prospering, not through their presence"—and, what is more than prosperity, we shall find our ideal in the actual.

F. SINCLAIRE.