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America for Americans

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"America for Americans"

By James S. Hearst

We were sitting by the fireplace at the club the other night. Somebody started on the immigration question and we all took hold with avidity. After a great deal of discussion John Phelps, a hard-headed financier and a bully, took his cigar from his mouth and snarled, "Well, by God, I say keep America for Americans and shut the gates on all that foreign trash. What's the good in letting in all those old-country people? You can't teach 'em anything and they mingle with us and by God they-----they-----"

"They contaminate us, eh, Phelps?" broke in Brickly. We smiled at the idea of anyone contaminating Phelps. "But did you ever stop to think of the number of nationalities that compose the American nation?" went on Brickly, addressing himself to Phelps. "Don't you know that there's no such thing as a pure American, so far as blood is concerned? Except the American Indian," he added sadly, "and he can't even be a citizen in his own country. America has been settled by every civilized nation under the sun, so when you talk of America for Americans it's just talk."

"No," said a voice from the corner. Westcott a new member, was speaking. "It isn't just talk. America for Americans is a mighty good slogan if it is taken in the right spirit. We send our ships to get foreign people; our steel manufacturers and our miner owners beg them to come; we point out to them the glorious futures to be made in America, and when they get here what do we do? We let them drop. We ignore them as though, as Phelps intimated, they might contaminate us. If we are going to allow those people to enter our United

States of America we should take the added responsibility of making them into good Americans. That is America for Americans in the right sense."

Sombody clapped and said, "Bravo, go ahead." We were all a little surprised to hear Westcott speak so earnestly. He was one of those silent chaps that never say much. We all liked him but nobody knew much about him. We kept still, hoping he would give Phelps a deserved reproof. Then he said, "If you fellows don't mind I'd like to tell a story that is true and that exactly illustrates the point I want to make." There was a chorus of approval. So Westcott began:

"About the year 1910 a German by the name of Jacob Schonberg emigrated to this country and settled in Illinois. A son Karl, who came with him, was all the family he had for his wife, daughter and another son had recently died in Berlin during a typhus epidemic. Schonberg was a man about sixty years of age and Karl was a bright looking chap of fourteen. They rented a farm and settled down.

"At first they had a hard time, not being used to our ways of farming. But Karl was a smart boy and easily picked up the language and our up-to-date way of doing things. He soon made acquaintances and friends among the neighbors, but his father rarely left the farm and made no progress in that direction. The older Schonberg was sensitive to the indifference of the neighbors and somewhat fearful of being ridiculed. Upon Karl he lavished the deep affection of a great and loving heart. He helped his son in the fields, but his especial care and pride was the garden, which was the best for miles around. He never acquired much skill in handling a plow but he could not be surr

passed in his use of a hoe.

"The owner of the Schonberg farm, whom we may call Benson, was a big frog in a little puddle and very intolerant toward his new tenants. He bullied and ragged them and made things generally disagreeable. Why they never resented his treatment and moved elsewhere I can't say. Perhaps they thought they had a good farm and didn't want to give it up, but more probably they thought that it was the custom of landlords to mistreat tenants and that moving wouldn't help.

"They were industrious, and four years later they surprised everyone by buying eighty acres and building a small house on it. The farm they bought adjoined the one that they had rented of Benson, and he seemed still to delight in causing them trouble. Once the Schonberg pigs got into Benson's cornfield and he made a great fuss about the damage done and threatened suit. However, he didn't have a chance to go to court, for the next morning Karl came to his office and, without a word, paid the sum asked by Benson. Another time Benson insisted that ~~the~~ fence which divided the two farms encroached on his land. He had the field surveyed, knowing that if Jacob's fence was set over too far the surveyers bill and the expense of moving the fence would have to be met by the Schonberg's. To his chagrin the fence was found to be the other way and he was forced to set it right. Benson was greatly angered at this and swore vengeance on 'those damn Germans.'

"By this time the war had been going on for several years, but the busy people in our section had paid little attention to it. Then came the Lusitania disaster and subsequently the entrance of the United States into the war. The lethargic town near which the Schonbergs lived woke suddenly from its sleep.

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Liberty Bond drives were organized, Red Cross societies formed and-----well you all remember.

"The Schonbergs were not molested until somebody remembered that they were Germans and had not subscribed to the First Liberty Loan. A group of men went to see Jacob and explain the need for money. They tried to appeal to his patriotism. 'It's for your country' they said.

"'My country?' said Jacob in a puzzled way.

"'Sure," said one of the men, 'you're an America, aren't you?'

"'No,' replied Jacob more Puzzled than ever, 'I don't know anything about it.'

"'Well, I'll be damned!' chorused the committee.

"Three Liberty Loan drives went by without any assistance from Jacob, and Benson, now serving on the draft board, decided to stir things up a little. He demanded that Jacob and Karl be interned as enemy aliens. He also tried to organize some of the young fellows into a kind of vigilance committee and give old Jacob a scare. But nothing came of either of these attempts, first because the Schonbergs had done nothing to invite the suspicion of the War Department, and second because the young chaps respected Karl too much.

"A few weeks later old Jacob, dressed in a queerly-cut wrinkled black suit, came to town and went directly to the draft board. Benson was there alone. He saw the old man enter, but made him wait in nervous agony, and then suddenly, 'What do you want?'

"Old Jacob cleared his throat, 'My poy,' he began huskily, 'my poy he wants to enlist und I can't hardly tink about. Is der something he could enlist for vere he don't half to fight?'

"Benson growled, 'Might enlist as a stretcher-bearer, they're non-combatants.'

"'Is it---is it---dangerous?' asked old Jacob timidly.

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"Here was Benson's chance, 'Dangerous? Hell, yes!' he said, maliciously. 'They all shoot at 'em,' and he watched with satisfaction the tears gather in Jacob's eyes as he turned away.

"The next day Karl enlisted as a private in the infantry and two weeks later he was in camp.

"Old Jacob, left alone, was kept busy from early morning until late- at night. Every morning at ten o'clock he was at the mail box waiting to see if there was any word from 'my poy Karl; and he was rarely disappointed.

"Six months passed and Karl came home on leave. Old Jacob was proud as a peacock of his soldier son, and he had every reason to be proud, for Karl was a fine looking chap in olive drab.

"Then Karl's division was ordered overseas and old Jacob, more bent and with his face more lined, came to town to announce the fact and give fifty dollars to the Red Cross. After a letter Karl he gave an additional fifty dollars to the Salvation Army and when the Fifth Liberty Loan Drive came on he bought two one hundred dollar bonds, 'one for me und for my poy, Karl'.

"Jacob heard from Karl more or less regularly for a few months and then one morning he received an official envelope from Washington. Old Jacob gave it to the postman to read because his hands shook so. It merely stated that the War Department was very sorry to say that Private Karl Schonberg had been badly gassed and wounded in action and that he might recover. I don't know how those things are worded, but that was the gist of it.

"A month later the Armistice was signed and about Christmas Karl was brought home. He was in bad shape, both lungs badly gassed and one leg pretty well shot up. He didn't say how it happened, but it was learned that he had been cited for bravery under

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fire. Of course the town fathers sent for a copy of his citation to hang in their heroes' gallery and old Jacob received a copy from the War Department and was inordinately proud of it.

"Karl didn't get any better and old Jacob had a special nurse for him and called in several specialists at his own expense. The verdict was always the same: 'If it wasn't for the gas, something might be done---.' Jacob was forced to mortgage his farm in order to meet the expenses and Benson got hold of the notes. When Karl learned of this he told his father that the Government would pay for his disability and supply the specialists and that if he died he wanted his father to use his insurance to get the land clear.

"With tears running down his cheeks the old man murmured, 'Karl, Karl, my boy, you must not talk like dot. I can raise on vun acre more than most of dese farmers can raise on twenty. We vill get along right, Karl. You must not talk like dot.'

"But in spite of Jacob's efforts, Karl grew weaker and weaker, and a morning came when all was silent at the Schonberg home. Late in the forenoon old Jacob, with a pitiful dazed look on his worn face, crept out to feed the stock and we knew that Karl was dead.

"Then the neighbors, understanding at last, turned out to help the broken old man. They made all the funeral arrangements, and Karl had a rifle squad to fire a salute and a bugler to blow taps over his grave. Kind neighbors took the old man home and stayed with him that night.

"But old Jacob couldn't get over it. He soon gave up working much and just pottered around the place. He got more gray and more feeble and did less each day. Then folks began to drop in and talk to him and help him with his chores and he

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seemed to get a little better. Karl had been his whole life and now that he was gone the old man was starved for friendship. He appreciated these visits, you could see.

"Never a word did he say about the fact that Karl need not have gone to war because he was not a citizen of this country. 'Karl was a hero,' he used to say. 'He died for his country.' A neighbor finally suggested that he take out his naturalization papers and become an American citizen. The old man's face lighted with eagerness. 'Can I do dot? It hurts me awful to think I can't belong to der country Karl died for.' So the neighbors put the wheels in motion to get old Jacob's naturalization papers. He kept hurring them with childlike eagerness, often repeating, 'Vy didn't I know dot before?'"

We stirred in our chairs, "Well," said Phelps, "I suppose he got them."

"Yes," answered Westcott, "he got them and the whole town wanted to act as witness."

Somebody else asked, "What became of Benson and the mortgage?"

Westcott hesitated a moment and then continued.

"As old Jacob got a little stronger he became more sociably inclined. He took in two ex-soldiers who were tramping the road for their health--gassed, you know, and had to keep out of doors. They made themselves at home there. Had a tent in the yard and helped Jacob whenever they were able, but he wouldn't take a cent for room and board. Now, I understand, he has six of the poor fellows with him. Old Jacob tells everybody, 'Mine Gott, vat a good ding it is to haf so many sons,' and the fellows all call him old Father Jacob.

"And about Benson? Well, he was so ashamed of himself that he took the mortgage out to Schonberg's and tore it up for a Christmas present. Old Jacob

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just stared at him in amazement and then exclaimed, 'Vy didn't I know Americans were like dis before?' and then cried like a baby.

"Now doesn't this help settle the question of America for Americans?"

Phelps, who always took exception to other people's arguments, said insolently, "How do you know so much about all this, Westcott? By God, for all we know you made it up. I for one think you've Made it up just to prove your point."

There was a slight pause. Then Westcott rose. "You'll have to take my word for it," he said slowly. "I ought to know a great deal about it. I was Benson."

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