

GALSWORTHY JOHN

STUDIES AND ESSAYS:
QUALITY, AND OTHERS

John Galsworthy

**Studies and Essays:
Quality, and Others**

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John Galsworthy
Quality and Other Studies and Essays

"Je vous dirai que l'exces est toujours un mal."
– ANATOLE FRANCE

QUALITY

I knew him from the days of my extreme youth, because he made my father's boots; inhabiting with his elder brother two little shops let into one, in a small by-street-now no more, but then most fashionably placed in the West End.

That tenement had a certain quiet distinction; there was no sign upon its face that he made for any of the Royal Family – merely his own German name of Gessler Brothers; and in the window a few pairs of boots. I remember that it always troubled me to account for those unvarying boots in the window, for he made only what was ordered, reaching nothing down, and it seemed so inconceivable that what he made could ever have failed to fit. Had he bought them to put there? That, too, seemed inconceivable. He would never have tolerated in his house leather on which he had not worked himself. Besides, they were too beautiful – the pair of pumps, so inexpressibly slim, the patent leathers with cloth tops, making water come into one's mouth, the tall brown riding boots with marvellous sooty glow, as if, though new, they had been worn a hundred years. Those pairs could only have been made by one who saw before him the Soul of Boot – so truly were they prototypes incarnating the very spirit of all foot-gear. These thoughts, of course, came to me later, though even when I was promoted to him, at the age of perhaps fourteen, some inkling haunted me of the dignity of himself and brother. For to make boots – such boots as he made – seemed to me then, and still seems to me, mysterious and wonderful.

I remember well my shy remark, one day, while stretching out to him my youthful foot: "Isn't it awfully hard to do, Mr. Gessler?"

And his answer, given with a sudden smile from out of the sardonic redness of his beard: "Id is an Ardt!"

Himself, he was a little as if made from leather, with his yellow crinkly face, and crinkly reddish hair and beard; and neat folds slanting down his cheeks to the corners of his mouth, and his guttural and one-toned voice; for leather is a sardonic substance, and stiff and slow of purpose. And that was the character of his face, save that his eyes, which were grey-blue, had in them the simple gravity of one secretly possessed by the Ideal. His elder brother was so very like him – though watery, paler in every way, with a great industry – that sometimes in early days I was not quite sure of him until the interview was over. Then I knew that it was he, if the words, "I will ask my brudder," had not been spoken; and that, if they had, it was his elder brother.

When one grew old and wild and ran up bills, one somehow never ran them up with Gessler Brothers. It would not have seemed becoming to go in there and stretch out one's foot to that blue iron-spectacled glance, owing him for more than – say – two pairs, just the comfortable reassurance that one was still his client.

For it was not possible to go to him very often – his boots lasted terribly, having something beyond the temporary – some, as it were, essence of boot stitched into them.

One went in, not as into most shops, in the mood of: "Please serve me, and let me go!" but restfully, as one enters a church; and, sitting on the single wooden chair, waited – for there was never anybody there. Soon, over the top edge of that sort of well – rather dark, and smelling soothingly of leather – which formed the shop, there would be seen his face, or that of his elder brother, peering down. A guttural sound, and the tip-tap of bast slippers beating the narrow wooden stairs, and he would stand before one without coat, a little bent, in leather apron, with sleeves turned back, blinking – as if awakened from some dream of boots, or like an owl surprised in daylight and annoyed at this interruption.

And I would say: "How do you do, Mr. Gessler? Could you make me a pair of Russia leather boots?"

Without a word he would leave me, retiring whence he came, or into the other portion of the shop, and I would, continue to rest in the wooden chair, inhaling the incense of his trade. Soon he would come back, holding in his thin, veined hand a piece of gold-brown leather. With eyes fixed on it, he would remark: "What a beautiful piece!" When I, too, had admired it, he would speak again. "When do you want dem?" And I would answer: "Oh! As soon as you conveniently can." And he would say: "To-morrow forenoon?" Or if he were his elder brother: "I will ask my brother!"

Then I would murmur: "Thank you! Good-morning, Mr. Gessler." "Good-morning!" he would reply, still looking at the leather in his hand. And as I moved to the door, I would hear the tip-tap of his bast slippers restoring him, up the stairs, to his dream of boots. But if it were some new kind of foot-gear that he had not yet made me, then indeed he would observe ceremony – divesting me of my boot and holding it long in his hand, looking at it with eyes at once critical and loving, as if recalling the glow with which he had created it, and rebuking the way in which one had disorganized this masterpiece. Then, placing my foot on a piece of paper, he would two or three times tickle the outer edges with a pencil and pass his nervous fingers over my toes, feeling himself into the heart of my requirements.

I cannot forget that day on which I had occasion to say to him; "Mr. Gessler, that last pair of town walking-boots creaked, you know."

He looked at me for a time without replying, as if expecting me to withdraw or qualify the statement, then said:

"It shouldn't 'ave creaked."

"It did, I'm afraid."

"You goddam wed before dey found demselves?"

"I don't think so."

At that he lowered his eyes, as if hunting for memory of those boots, and I felt sorry I had mentioned this grave thing.

"Zend dem back!" he said; "I will look at dem."

A feeling of compassion for my creaking boots surged up in me, so well could I imagine the sorrowful long curiosity of regard which he would bend on them.

"Zome boods," he said slowly, "are bad from birth. If I can do noding wid dem, I dake dem off your bill."

Once (once only) I went absent-mindedly into his shop in a pair of boots bought in an emergency at some large firm's. He took my order without showing me any leather, and I could feel his eyes penetrating the inferior integument of my foot. At last he said:

"Dose are nod my boods."

The tone was not one of anger, nor of sorrow, not even of contempt, but there was in it something quiet that froze the blood. He put his hand down and pressed a finger on the place where the left boot, endeavouring to be fashionable, was not quite comfortable.

"It 'urds you dere," he said. "Dose big virms 'ave no self-respect. Drash!" And then, as if something had given way within him, he spoke long and bitterly. It was the only time I ever heard him discuss the conditions and hardships of his trade.

"Dey get it all," he said, "dey get it by advertisement, nod by work. Dey dake it away from us, who love our boods. It comes to this – bresently I haf no work. Every year it gets less you will see." And looking at his lined face I saw things I had never noticed before, bitter things and bitter struggle – and what a lot of grey hairs there seemed suddenly in his red beard!

As best I could, I explained the circumstances of the purchase of those ill-omened boots. But his face and voice made so deep impression that during the next few minutes I ordered many pairs. Nemesis fell! They lasted more terribly than ever. And I was not able conscientiously to go to him for nearly two years.

When at last I went I was surprised to find that outside one of the two little windows of his shop another name was painted, also that of a bootmaker-making, of course, for the Royal Family. The old familiar boots, no longer in dignified isolation, were huddled in the single window. Inside, the now contracted well of the one little shop was more scented and darker than ever. And it was longer than usual, too, before a face peered down, and the tip-tap of the bast slippers began. At last he stood before me, and, gazing through those rusty iron spectacles, said:

"Mr. – , isn'd it?"

"Ah! Mr. Gessler," I stammered, "but your boots are really too good, you know! See, these are quite decent still!" And I stretched out to him my foot. He looked at it.

"Yes," he said, "beople do nod wand good hoods, id seems."

To get away from his reproachful eyes and voice I hastily remarked: "What have you done to your shop?"

He answered quietly: "Id was too exbensif. Do you wand some boods?"

I ordered three pairs, though I had only wanted two, and quickly left. I had, I do not know quite what feeling of being part, in his mind, of a conspiracy against him; or not perhaps so much against him as against his idea of boot. One does not, I suppose, care to feel like that; for it was again many months before my next visit to his shop, paid, I remember, with the feeling: "Oh! well, I can't leave the old boy – so here goes! Perhaps it'll be his elder brother!"

For his elder brother, I knew, had not character enough to reproach me, even dumbly.

And, to my relief, in the shop there did appear to be his elder brother, handling a piece of leather.

"Well, Mr. Gessler," I said, "how are you?"

He came close, and peered at me.

"I am breddy well," he said slowly "but my elder brudder is dead."

And I saw that it was indeed himself – but how aged and wan! And never before had I heard him mention his brother. Much shocked; I murmured: "Oh! I am sorry!"

"Yes," he answered, "he was a good man, he made a good bood; but he is dead." And he touched the top of his head, where the hair had suddenly gone as thin as it had been on that of his poor brother, to indicate, I suppose, the cause of death. "He could nod ged over losing de oder shop. Do you wand any hoods?" And he held up the leather in his hand: "Id's a beaudiful biece."

I ordered several pairs. It was very long before they came – but they were better than ever. One simply could not wear them out. And soon after that I went abroad.

It was over a year before I was again in London. And the first shop I went to was my old friend's. I had left a man of sixty, I came back to one of seventy-five, pinched and worn and tremulous, who genuinely, this time, did not at first know me.

"Oh! Mr. Gessler," I said, sick at heart; "how splendid your boots are! See, I've been wearing this pair nearly all the time I've been abroad; and they're not half worn out, are they?"

He looked long at my boots – a pair of Russia leather, and his face seemed to regain steadiness. Putting his hand on my instep, he said:

"Do dey vid you here? I 'ad drouble wid dat bair, I remember."

I assured him that they had fitted beautifully.

"Do you wand any boods?" he said. "I can make dem quickly; id is a slack dime."

I answered: "Please, please! I want boots all round – every kind!"

"I will make a vresh model. Your food must be bigger." And with utter slowness, he traced round my foot, and felt my toes, only once looking up to say:

"Did I dell you my brudder was dead?"

To watch him was painful, so feeble had he grown; I was glad to get away.

I had given those boots up, when one evening they came. Opening the parcel, I set the four pairs out in a row. Then one by one I tried them on. There was no doubt about it. In shape and fit,

in finish and quality of leather, they were the best he had ever made me. And in the mouth of one of the Town walking-boots I found his bill.

The amount was the same as usual, but it gave me quite a shock. He had never before sent it in till quarter day. I flew down-stairs, and wrote a cheque, and posted it at once with my own hand.

A week later, passing the little street, I thought I would go in and tell him how splendidly the new boots fitted. But when I came to where his shop had been, his name was gone. Still there, in the window, were the slim pumps, the patent leathers with cloth tops, the sooty riding boots.

I went in, very much disturbed. In the two little shops – again made into one – was a young man with an English face.

"Mr. Gessler in?" I said.

He gave me a strange, ingratiating look.

"No, sir," he said, "no. But we can attend to anything with pleasure.

We've taken the shop over. You've seen our name, no doubt, next door.

We make for some very good people."

"Yes, Yes," I said; "but Mr. Gessler?"

"Oh!" he answered; "dead."

"Dead! But I only received these boots from him last Wednesday week."

"Ah!" he said; "a shockin' go. Poor old man starved 'imself."

"Good God!"

"Slow starvation, the doctor called it! You see he went to work in such a way! Would keep the shop on; wouldn't have a soul touch his boots except himself. When he got an order, it took him such a time. People won't wait. He lost everybody. And there he'd sit, goin' on and on – I will say that for him not a man in London made a better boot! But look at the competition! He never advertised! Would 'ave the best leather, too, and do it all 'imself. Well, there it is. What could you expect with his ideas?"

"But starvation – !"

"That may be a bit flowery, as the sayin' is – but I know myself he was sittin' over his boots day and night, to the very last. You see I used to watch him. Never gave 'imself time to eat; never had a penny in the house. All went in rent and leather. How he lived so long I don't know. He regular let his fire go out. He was a character. But he made good boots."

"Yes," I said, "he made good boots."

And I turned and went out quickly, for I did not want that youth to know that I could hardly see. 1911

THE GRAND JURY – IN TWO PANELS AND A FRAME

Read that piece of paper, which summoned me to sit on the Grand Jury at the approaching Sessions, lying in a scoop of the shore close to the great rollers of the sea – that span of eternal freedom, deprived just there of too great liberty by the word "Atlantic." And I remember thinking, as I read, that in each breaking wave was some particle which had visited every shore in all the world – that in each sparkle of hot sunlight stealing that bright water up into the sky, was the microcosm of all change, and of all unity.

PANEL I

In answer to that piece of paper, I presented myself at the proper place in due course and with a certain trepidation. What was it that I was about to do? For I had no experience of these things. And, being too early, I walked a little to and fro, looking at all those my partners in this matter of the purification of Society. Prosecutors, witnesses, officials, policemen, detectives, undetected, pressmen, barristers, loafers, clerks, cadgers, jurymen. And I remember having something of the feeling that one has when one looks into a sink without holding one's nose. There was such uneasy hurry, so strange a disenchanting look, a sort of spiritual dirt, about all that place, and there were – faces! And I thought: To them my face must seem as their faces seem to me!

Soon I was taken with my accomplices to have my name called, and to be sworn. I do not remember much about that process, too occupied with wondering what these companions of mine were like; but presently we all came to a long room with a long table, where nineteen lists of indictments and nineteen pieces of blotting paper were set alongside nineteen pens. We did not, I recollect, speak much to one another, but sat down, and studied those nineteen lists. We had eighty-seven cases on which to pronounce whether the bill was true or no; and the clerk assured us we should get through them in two days at most. Over the top of these indictments I regarded my eighteen fellows. There was in me a hunger of inquiry, as to what they thought about this business; and a sort of sorrowful affection for them, as if we were all a ship's company bound on some strange and awkward expedition. I wondered, till I thought my wonder must be coming through my eyes, whether they had the same curious sensation that I was feeling, of doing something illegitimate, which I had not been born to do, together with a sense of self-importance, a sort of unholy interest in thus dealing with the lives of my fellow men. And slowly, watching them, I came to the conclusion that I need not wonder. All with the exception perhaps of two, a painter and a Jew looked such good citizens. I became gradually sure that they were not troubled with the lap and wash of speculation; unclogged by any devastating sense of unity; pure of doubt, and undefiled by an uneasy conscience.

But now they began to bring us in the evidence. They brought it quickly. And at first we looked at it, whatever it was, with a sort of solemn excitement. Were we not arbiters of men's fates, purifiers of Society, more important by far than Judge or Common Jury? For if we did not bring in a true bill there was an end; the accused would be discharged.

We set to work, slowly at first, then faster and still faster, bringing in true bills; and after every one making a mark in our lists so that we might know where we were. We brought in true bills for burglary, and false pretences, larceny, and fraud; we brought them in for manslaughter, rape, and arson. When we had ten or so, two of us would get up and bear them away down to the Court below and lay them before the Judge. "Thank you, gentlemen!" he would say, or words to that effect; and we would go up again, and go on bringing in true bills. I noticed that at the evidence of each fresh bill we looked with a little less excitement, and a little less solemnity, making every time a shorter

tick and a shorter note in the margin of our lists. All the bills we had – fifty-seven – we brought in true. And the morning and the afternoon made that day, till we rested and went to our homes.

Next day we were all back in our places at the appointed hour, and, not greeting each other much, at once began to bring in bills. We brought them in, not quite so fast, as though some lurking megrim, some microbe of dissatisfaction with ourselves was at work within us. It was as if we wanted to throw one out, as if we felt our work too perfect. And presently it came. A case of defrauding one Sophie Liebermann, or Laubermann, or some such foreign name, by giving her one of those five-pound Christmas-card banknotes just then in fashion, and receiving from her, as she alleged, three real sovereigns change. There was a certain piquancy about the matter, and I well remember noticing how we sat a little forward and turned in our seats when they brought in the prosecutrix to give evidence. Pale, self-possessed, dressed in black, and rather comely, neither brazen nor furtive, speaking but poor English, her broad, matter-of-fact face, with its wide-set grey eyes and thickish nose and lips, made on me, I recollect, an impression of rather stupid honesty. I do not think they had told us in so many words what her calling was, nor do I remember whether she actually disclosed it, but by our demeanour I could tell that we had all realized what was the nature of the service rendered to the accused, in return for which he had given her this worthless note. In her rather guttural but pleasant voice she answered all our questions – not very far from tears, I think, but saved by native stolidity, and perhaps a little by the fear that purifiers of Society might not be the proper audience for emotion. When she had left us we recalled the detective, and still, as it were, touching the delicate matter with the tips of our tongues, so as not, being men of the world, to seem biassed against anything, we definitely elicited from him her profession and these words: "If she's speaking the truth, gentlemen; but, as you know, these women, they don't always, specially the foreign ones!" When he, too, had gone, we looked at each other in unwonted silence. None of us quite liked, it seemed, to be first to speak. Then our foreman said: "There's no doubt, I think, that he gave her the note – mean trick, of course, but we can't have him on that alone – bit too irregular – no consideration in law, I take it."

He smiled a little at our smiles, and then went on: "The question, gentlemen, really seems to be, are we to take her word that she actually gave him change?" Again, for quite half a minute; we were silent, and then, the fattest one of us said, suddenly: "Very dangerous – goin' on the word of these women."

And at once, as if he had released something in our souls, we all (save two or three) broke out. It wouldn't do! It wasn't safe! Seeing what these women were! It was exactly as if, without word said, we had each been swearing the other to some secret compact to protect Society. As if we had been whispering to each other something like this: "These women – of course, we need them, but for all that we can't possibly recognise them as within the Law; we can't do that without endangering the safety of every one of us. In this matter we are trustees for all men – indeed, even for ourselves, for who knows at what moment we might not ourselves require their services, and it would be exceedingly awkward if their word were considered the equal of our own!" Not one of us, certainly said anything so crude as this; none the less did many of us feel it. Then the foreman, looking slowly round the table, said: "Well, gentlemen, I think we are all agreed to throw out this bill"; and all, except the painter, the Jew, and one other, murmured: "Yes." And, as though, in throwing out this bill we had cast some trouble off our minds, we went on with the greater speed, bringing in true bills. About two o'clock we finished, and trooped down to the Court to be released. On the stairway the Jew came close, and, having examined me a little sharply with his velvety slits of eyes, as if to see that he was not making a mistake, said: "Ith fonny – we bring in eighty thix bills true, and one we throw out, and the one we throw out we know it to be true, and the dirtieth job of the whole lot. Ith fonny!" "Yes," I answered him, "our sense of respectability does seem excessive." But just then we reached the Court, where, in his red robe and grey wig, with his clear-cut, handsome face, the judge seemed to shine and radiate, like sun through gloom. "I thank you, gentlemen," he said, in a voice courteous and a little mocking, as though he had somewhere seen us before: "I thank you for the way in which you have performed

your duties. I have not the pleasure of assigning to you anything for your services except the privilege of going over a prison, where you will be able to see what sort of existence awaits many of those to whose cases you have devoted so much of your valuable time. You are released, gentlemen."

Looking at each, other a little hurriedly, and not taking too much farewell, for fear of having to meet again, we separated.

I was, then, free – free of the injunction of that piece of paper reposing in my pocket. Yet its influence was still upon me. I did not hurry away, but lingered in the courts, fascinated by the notion that the fate of each prisoner had first passed through my hands. At last I made an effort, and went out into the corridor. There I passed a woman whose figure seemed familiar. She was sitting with her hands in her lap looking straight before her, pale-faced and not uncomely, with thickish mouth and nose – the woman whose bill we had thrown out. Why was she sitting there? Had she not then realised that we had quashed her claim; or was she, like myself, kept here by mere attraction of the Law? Following I know not what impulse, I said: "Your case was dismissed, wasn't it?" She looked up at me stolidly, and a tear, which had evidently been long gathering, dropped at the movement. "I do not know; I wait to see," she said in her thick voice; "I think there has been mistake." My face, no doubt, betrayed something of my sentiments about her case, for the thick tears began rolling fast down her pasty cheeks, and her pent-up feeling suddenly flowed forth in words: "I work 'ard; Gott! how I work hard! And there comes dis little beastly man, and rob me. And they say: 'Ah! yes; but you are a bad woman, we don't trust you – you speak lie.' But I speak druth, I am not a bad woman – I come from Hamburg." "Yes, yes," I murmured; "yes, yes." "I do not know this country well, sir. I speak bad English. Is that why they do not trust my word?" She was silent for a moment, searching my face, then broke out again: "It is all 'ard work in my profession, I make very little, I cannot afford to be rob. Without the men I cannot make my living, I must trust them – and they rob me like this, it is too 'ard." And the slow tears rolled faster and faster from her eyes on to her hands and her black lap. Then quietly, and looking for a moment singularly like a big, unhappy child, she asked: "Will you please tell me, sir, why they will not give me the law of that dirty little man?"

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