Shakespeare and the founders of liberty in America

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SHAKESPEARE AND THE FOUNDERS
OF LIBERTY IN AMERICA
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AND THE

FOUNDERS OF LIBERTY IN AMERICA

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PREFACE

In this period of conflict, the sternest that the world has known, when we have joined heart and hand with Great Britain, it may profit Americans to recall how essentially at one with Englishmen we have always been in everything that counts. That the speech, the poetry, of the race are ours and theirs in common, we know—they are Shakespeare. But that the institutions, the law and the liberty, the democracy administered by the fittest, are not only theirs and ours in common, but are derived from Shakespeare’s England, and are Shakespeare, too, we do not generally know or, if we have known, we do not always remember.

“Shakespeare and the Founders of Liberty in America!” exclaims the genial humorist. “What does the man mean?—That Shakespeare hobnobbed with Washington or helped Jefferson write the Declaration of Independence?” Hardly; but something not itself altogether lacking in the element of surprise: that Shakespeare was acquainted with more than one of the English statesmen who wrested from King James the colonial charters by which, between 1606 and 1620, English liberty was first planted in Virginia and New England—individual freedom and equality, due process of the law and independence
of the courts, trial by jury, the right of representative assembly, and government by consent of the governed; that Shakespeare had confidential relations with these English patriots, the founders of American liberty, and that these relations are proved by the contents and source of one of his plays; that Shakespeare was in sympathy with the teachings of the moral and political master of the liberal movement, and that this sympathy is manifest in many of the poet’s works.

The purpose of this book is to show, moreover, that the thoughts and even the words of the liberal master, the judicious Hooker, passed into the minds of our Revolutionary Fathers and into the Declaration of Independence; and that the principles common to Shakespeare and Hooker, to Sir Edwin Sandys, Southampton, and the other Patriots of seventeenth-century England, several of them Shakespeare’s friends, are the principles of liberty which America enjoys today. The purpose is, also, to remind Americans that the eleven-hundred-year heritage of language and literature, of race, of custom, of law, of spirit energizing toward freedom—civil and religious—of political development, cherished by Britons at home and Britons in the American colonies in Shakespeare’s time, did not cease with the American Revolution; that the colonists were but asserting their rights as Englishmen under charter and common law, and that the hearts of the truest and noblest Englishmen at home were with them
in the struggle; that the heritage of today is a heritage which for fourteen hundred years has been ripening for the British Empire and America alike.

The political part of this heritage is the common property of the triad of great modern democracies—in order of birth, the United States of America, the union of free commonwealths styled the British Empire, the present French Republic. But the nursing mother of all three was the liberal England of Shakespeare and Hooker and their friends among the Patriots of early seventeenth-century England. What wonder that in the agony of the twentieth century these sister democracies march side by side that military autocracy may perish from the face of the earth!

To the descendants of Virginia, Britannia and the Mayflower and of the American Revolution, to the descendants of their English brothers—the Patriots of Stuart England and the Britain of George III, and to the descendants of Lafayette and Beaumarchais and Rochambeau,—to the descendants not of the blood alone but of the spirit, of the heart and conscience, the faith and stern resolve, the undying devotion to freedom, right, and unconquerable hope, this little book is dedicated.

CHARLES MILLS GAYLEY.

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