

Towards Nationhood
in
West Africa

by
J. W. DE GRAFT JOHNSON

THREE SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

TOWARDS NATIONHOOD IN WEST AFRICA



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IN HOC SIGNO

Towards Nationhood in West Africa

By

J. W. DE GRAFT JOHNSON

*Thoughts of Young Africa
Addressed to Young Britain*

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PREFACE

THE hope and desire of Africa is the same throughout the length and breadth of the continent. It is concentrated in the great yearning for freedom, for emancipation from the yoke of the centuries. The youth of Africa everywhere, is assailed by the alluring thoughts of a free Africa, of an Africa that owning no foreign burden, but stepping into her rightful place as a unit in the powerful army of the human family, will emerge from the darkness of the past and assume her obligations and responsibilities as a respectable and respected member of society.

Such thoughts and sentiments have been crystallised with this history of African aspirations and sent forth into the world with the blessing of Africa. In order to deal definitely with concrete facts and figures, and to present a true and uncoloured picture of the political appeal, it has been necessary to take the case of some particular country. The Gold Coast has been selected *first*, because it is the home of the writer and the region with which he is most familiar; *secondly*, because of recent years, the changes and alterations, both in the country and in the outlook of the people, have been phenomenal; *thirdly*, because it has built up one of the greatest romances of modern industry and is very much to the fore at the present time; and *lastly*, because there, certain experiments are being conducted into new ways and methods of education, sanitation and health and economic development.

What is said here, however, applies with certain necessary local adjustments and modifications to various parts of Africa and in particular, to British West Africa.

Young Africans are co-operating for the cause of Africa. In their two organisations, the Union of Students of African Descent and the West African Students' Union

they are correlating lines of thought and action. They have laid seige to the citadel of England's nobleness of mind and soul, and there are hopes, great hopes, that the future will see the African better understood and appreciated, and given his due right of recognition in the Comity of Nations.

The views herein expressed received their inspiration from my father, to whom I was secretary for many years. Those who came in contact with him realised his great soulness and magnanimity. He fostered a spirit of mutual forbearance between white and black, and was a strong supporter of Anglo-African relations. But this did not blind him to his duty to his people and country, and he died as he lived, a pillar of support and a tower of strength to his Motherland. I have taken the liberty to include in this sketch, a short memoir of his life. I am convinced that the reader of the appeal will understand it better for a little insight into the character of the man to whom I owe all I am and hope to be. While this work was in progress he passed away, but it is a source of some comfort to me that its publication received his sanction.

I am indebted to my many friends, both in England, America, and in West Africa for much sympathy and encouragement—Particularly to Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Frith of the London Fields Fellowship, Mr. Frank Estcourt, of the Christian Endeavour Comradeship (Manchester Branch) who has very kindly drawn the illustrations at the request of Miss Pollard, Secretary of the London Branch; and Mr. K. Benstir Enchill of Nsawam, whose practical assistance has made the publication possible.

LONDON,

Dies Irae,

March 24th, 1928.

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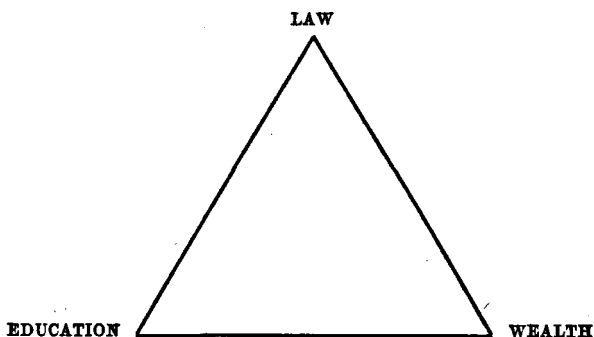
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THE TRIANGLE OF DYNAMIC FORCES DIRECTING
HUMAN DESTINY.

“ That democracy alone will be triumphant which has both intelligence and character. To develop them among the whole people is the task of education in a democracy. Not by vainglorious boasting, not by self-satisfied indifference, not by selfish and indolent withdrawal from participation in the interests and government of the community, but rather by the enthusiasm, born of intense conviction, that finds the happiness of each in the good of all, will our educational ideals be satisfied and our free government be placed beyond the reach of the forces of dissolution and decay.”

DR. NICHOLAS BUTLER.

APPENDIX I

Dear Sir,

I beg to acknowledge your letter * of the 30th inst., with respect to legislation on the Gold Coast as to native jurisdiction.

I was strongly opposed to the Ordinance of 1910 for three reasons.

Firstly. At the date of the bringing in of the Bill there was already a number of Chiefs who had jurisdiction under the Native Jurisdiction Ordinance†. The system of Native jurisdiction as then existing was intensely bad, as it could not be right for the judges to pocket the fees and fines imposed; however, the system was there, a product of the soil, and could not be done away with; but there was no need to extend it, and I thought it a grave Error of Policy to extend such jurisdiction in the indiscriminate manner proposed in the Bill.

Secondly. It was a retrograde step. When the British came to the Gold Coast the only courts were those of the Native Chiefs. The courts could not properly decide cases between Europeans, and would have had difficulty in deciding cases between Europeans and Natives of the country. As a consequence the British set up tribunals of their own. Gradually Native litigants repaired to these tribunals, and the respect for these was so great that there was no difficulty in enforcing their decisions. These tribunals in time were so much frequented by Native litigants that the courts of the

* My letter was to the effect that while preparing the character sketch of the late Hon. J. M. Sarbah, I discovered the strange fact that Sir Brandforth had opposed the passage of the 1910 Ordinance, and that I should be glad if he would enlighten me about the grounds of his opposition.

† That is of 1883.

Chiefs became deserted and (I am speaking from recollection) the Chief of Cape Coast complained to Governor Maclean that he (Capt. Maclean) had by some imperceptible means taken away all his jurisdiction. It was on this foundation viz: the preference of the Natives of the Country for the British tribunals over the Native Courts that the present Supreme Court of the Colony is based; and it was by means of the jurisdiction that these tribunals exercised, that the British got a permanent footing on the Gold Coast. History showed that the Native litigant preferred the British Court to his own Native Court, and for the Government deliberately to go against the confirmed predilection of the Native litigant and to force him to repair to the Native Court instead of the British Court, was not only a retrograde step but unfair to the Native litigant. The Government considered the Chiefs only, and not the people.

Thirdly. The Bill left much to be desired in form and method. Assuming that the Government's intention was to be carried out, the Bill was susceptible of much improvement; as it was passed it was not fit for the Statute Book. I did my utmost to improve it, and to some extent succeeded, but many suggestions which from my experience as a judge warranted the making, were put on one side.

I did not vacate* my seat on the Legislation Council. In early days it was an advantage for the Chief Justice to be a Member of the Legislative Council, but as the Colony advanced it became an anomaly, and when I

* In my letter I mentioned that it was understood locally that he vacated his seat on the Council as a result of this Ordinance (1910). According to the records (*Gold Coast Gazette*, 1910) what appears to have happened was that Sir Brandforth was very much opposed to the rush with which Government wanted to pass the measure through; and when the Bill came up for the Second Reading, he moved that it should not be proceeded with at that rate; he was however ruled out and in order to avoid recording an adverse vote, he left the Council Chamber temporarily and resumed his seat later for the further discussion on the Bill.

retired, the opportunity was taken to make an alteration in the constitution of the Legislation Council, and the Chief Justice ceased to be a member of that body.

The minutes as reported in the records (Gold Coast Gazettes for 1910) are only approximately correct. All the points made and arguments adduced by the Governor and the Attorney-General are to be found there, but that does not apply to points made and arguments put forward by me. When the minutes came up for confirmation, I pointed out numerous omissions, but was only able to get some of them inserted in the minutes, with the consequence that I dissented from their confirmation. It was at the conclusion of the meeting, the last meeting at which Sir John Rodger presided, that I had the privilege of moving a Resolution of Farewell to Sir John and Lady Rodger.

You will note that I rarely, if ever, opposed the Government by voting against it. The Chief Justice was absolutely independent of the Legislation Council, but whenever I gravely disagreed with the Government I withdrew temporarily instead of recording an adverse vote.

Yours truly,

W. BRANDFORTH GRIFFITH.

London

6.1.1928.

APPENDIX II

THE LATE MR. J. W. DE GRAFT JOHNSON

THE one remains, the many change and pass,
Heaven's light for ever shines, Earth's shadows fly ;
Life like a dome of many-coloured glass
Stains the white radiance of Eternity
Until death tramples it to fragments.

SHELLEY.

THUS in the glow and warmth of a tropical morning, while nature shone in resplendent colours over the broad expansive field and the flowers shed their sweet fragrance scenting the gentle breezes that travelled from the riverside ; while the birds sang and the sounds of refreshing music stole gently on the ear from the forests near ; while the bustle and hustle of everyday life was gathering itself together for the daily round of motion ; while all the world seemed bright and fair with hopes renewed, with the joy of life coursing through the blood, even so in the very summit of expectation and contentment, the unerring thunderbolt of death struck his little dome of many-coloured glass and trampled it to fragments !

He was a man who loved his country and his race. He served the cause of his fatherland at all times, and held aloft the banner of national honour and prestige entrusted to him by the traditions of his ancestors. He acted from a high sense of duty on the principle that because right is right, it were wisdom to scorn the fear of consequence. So he preached and so he practised and those who came within the circle of his influence went away with their hopes brightened, their faith in Africa strengthened and their trust in God deepened.

Kwesie Johnson as he was popularly known at Cape Coast, was born on August 5th, 1860. His mother was



Betsey de Graft, daughter of that Joseph de Graft who figures so prominently in Gold Coast history. His maternal uncle was William de Graft whose request for a supply of Bibles addressed to Captain Potter, led ultimately to the happy result of the Wesleyan Methodist Society sending missionaries to the Gold Coast in 1834. His father was Joseph Benjamin Johnson, son of Robert Swain Johnson, sometime Colonial Secretary to Her Majesty's Government on the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone.

He received his education at the Colonial School in the town of his birth and under the care and supervision of another maternal uncle, John Coleman de Graft, a well-known political figure in those days.

From School, young de Graft Johnson entered serious life by serving his apprenticeship in the employment of Messrs. F. and A. Swanzy, becoming their factor at Elmina in the early eighties. It was in the course of this service that he developed that quality of truthfulness and plain speaking which later characterised all his actions and gave a decided bent to his love of the truth, and the truth only, at all times. In addition, the family trait of not stooping to eat humble pie began to assert itself and two incidents belonging to this period of his life clearly indicate that his character had been well formed. One was in connection with the revolt of the shipping and landing clerks at Cape Coast in the eighties, when new regulations were put into operation permitting and legalising port labour on Sundays. Mr. de Graft Johnson headed this strike on the principle that the Lord's day was the Lord's day and should be observed as the Lord's day. The merchant companies were aware of this resolution but did not for a moment suspect that the young Africans had any grit and determination to adhere to it. But after events proved that not only did the young men possess sufficient stamina and the courage of their convictions, but that the leader was as cool and collected as

a cucumber under the raging torrent of indignation aroused by their action in actually refusing to attend to a ship which came into port on Sunday. Unperturbed by the promises of reward if they served the ship or threats of dismissal if they persisted in their opposition, young de Graft Johnson attended divine service as usual in the evening, came back, had a good dinner and a sound rest. But he was not dismissed, he was promoted instead.

The second incident was of a more serious nature. It occurred on board a Man-of-War where on being assaulted by an officer, Mr. de Graft Johnson returned the battery with satisfactory interest. A hue and cry was raised but Johnson slipped off the ship's side into his boat and made for the shore. He was chased by the ship's launch but the Nanamu were in his favour and he arrived on shore safe in wind and limb. His truthful and outspoken nature made him relate the story of his experiences to his chief, Mr Lyall, who had great faith and confidence in him. The next day by an official communication to Mr. Lyall, the supposed miscreant was ordered to be extradited for a trial by court martial on board the Man-of-War. Mr. de Graft Johnson won the case but was cautioned by his chief against taking such risks in the future.

After some years of experience in mercantile work in various capacities and in various parts of the country, Mr. de Graft Johnson set up for himself in business, specialising in the silk trade. Success crowned his ambition and made it possible for him to devote a great deal of time, money, and energy to the cause that lay nearest his heart—Education and Agriculture.

The story of his interest in the affairs of his country and the stimulating example he set to others in the discharge of their duties in the service of the fatherland is briefly told in the many eloquent tributes paid to him by the press on the occasion of his sad and sudden translation to the higher service. "He was a man of fire and of

action. He was all bustle and hustle and rustle. He was the one man who stood on four square and told the demagogue to the face. Neither position nor wealth ever bought his judgment. Truth never flinched with him. He was ever active dealing with falsehood red in tooth and claw. He believed in a righteous cause. He was the first man to bring to the notice of Mr. J. P. Brown, Chief J. D. Abraham, Hon. J. M. Sarbah and others, the abominable Lands Bill of 1897. He provoked an agitation, and as a result, the Gold Coast Aborigines Rights Protection Society was founded, himself being a member. His executive ability was most pronounced. He was full of constructive suggestions and wise counsel. He was an excellent man—a man who left the world better than he met it.**

In private life, Mr. de Graft Johnson was the head of the Twidan clan, whose symbol is the figure of a Tiger. To the clan as to the nation, he suffered no personal feelings, no matter how great the sacrifice, to stand between him and what he conceived to be his duty.

Within the family circle he was an affectionate father, deeply devoted to his children and spared no pains to secure for them the best legacy of a parent, a sound education. He had the satisfaction of knowing that whatever sacrifice he had made in their behalf was well worth it for the children returned his love and devotion by personal service and by trying to carry out in their own lives the ideals that he had striven so earnestly and sincerely to hold up before them.

In a letter to his eldest surviving son, Mr. J. C. de Graft Johnson, Assistant Secretary for Native Affairs, Mr. J. T. Furley, C.M.G., O.B.E., late Colonial Secretary of Sierra Leone and formerly Secretary for Native affairs on the Gold Coast, writes as follows:—

“ I was extremely sorry to read in the Gold Coast papers the news of your father's death and the tragic

* *Gold Coast Leader*. Feb. 25—March 3, 1928.

circumstances attending it; and I am writing you a line to express my deep sense of sympathy with you and your family in your great loss.

I remember your father quite well, and knew him at the time I was living in Cape Coast.

I remember him there as a member of the Cape Coast Town Council, and always respected him; and he, although an elected and independent member was always ready to act with and assist the official President of the Council at the time. He was a prominent member of the community at that time and from all the accounts he continued to be so up to the time of his sudden death."

He died on Monday, February 27th, 1928, as the result of an accident. A falling tree caught him while working on his farm, and ere medical science could come to his aid, he was no more. Speaking of the deceased, the *Gold Coast Times* in its issue of March 3rd, 1928, says:—

"The tragic episode of the passing of Mr. Joseph William de Graft Johnson has sent a shock throughout the country, and the suddenness of the event and the circumstances surrounding it have deepened the sorrow of those intimately connected with the deceased. But the larger public, beyond the family circle and the range of personal acquaintances will regard the loss more from the national point of view, for Mr. Johnson was undoubtedly a race leader whom the country can ill spare at this particular juncture when it needs the services of a man of his character and capacity for work. But this is neither the time nor the place to deal fully with the life-work of the deceased; and we shall, for the moment, pass in review certain traits in the character of the man for the benefit of the rising generation. He had no doubt his failings like all of us, but he possessed in a marked degree certain qualities which fitted him for the position of leadership that he held with such success as testified by the popular homage paid him at his funeral last Tuesday. He had a deep sense of duty and with it great courage and firmness in purpose. We are all pretty familiar with his

readiness to respond to the call of duty wherever it proceeded and the diligence he applied to all good causes having in view the intellectual, economic, and political advance of the people. There had scarcely been any public movement of importance in the last forty years with which he was not associated; but though he took an active part in nearly every racial movement of importance he never put himself forward, for Mr. de Graft Johnson was not a placeman. And his sense of duty was so deep that he could rise above mere party considerations as can be judged from the embarrassing circumstances in which he accepted the position as vice-president of the Aborigines Society. He was a statesman, not a politician, and as a statesman he worked consistently for the welfare and safety of the race without looking for a return in one shape or the other, and his public life was all along above suspicion. But in our view the greatest of his qualities was his steadfast fidelity to his country. As a statesman he was steadfast unto death, for though others lagged behind or got defected; though some fell by the wayside and were absorbed by the cares of life to neglect their duty to their country, he plodded along up to an age at which some elderly people would think that they had done enough work and needed a rest. He was steadfast unto death, and because he was true and sincere to the cause of his people he retained to the last their confidence which is the greatest reward of a statesman. And the measure of our loss is that one of our elderly statesmen, whom we could trust implicitly not to betray the interests of his people for place or honour, has been suddenly snatched from us when we can ill spare him. To-day Britain is lamenting the loss of Lord Oxford and Earl Haig; but Britain's range of the people of the sterling qualities of these men is by no means exhausted by the removal of the two illustrious Britons. But what of us? How many people of the cast of de Graft Johnson have we still with us? When we cast our eyes around we shall find that since the death of Jacob Sey the ranks of our prominent people, both in the sphere of commerce and letters, have been thinning rapidly and that we have not been filling the gaps, and this is a very serious position

for the future of the country. The only consolation, perhaps, is that we have a number of young people who could with some effort make themselves competent to fill the places rendered vacant by removals through death. And it is to them we appeal with the hope that the lives of our great men will inspire them with a lofty ambition to qualify themselves to fill their places."

He lived and died a true African at heart. He was a firm believer in the Empire and in British Statesmanship, and a devoted and loyal son of the race. He professed and practised Christianity and possessed in an excellent degree, an unbounded faith and trust in Providence.

He is "dead" but beyond the veil, in the soft shades of paradise he meets again old faces and old friends; with them during life—

Far from the madding crowds ignoble strife
 Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
 Beneath the cool sequester'd vale of life
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.,

Awhile they commune with each other but beckon to Afric's sons to buckle up the sword and continue the fight for Africa's freedom.

Who follows in their train?