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CIVILIZATION

CLIVE BELL



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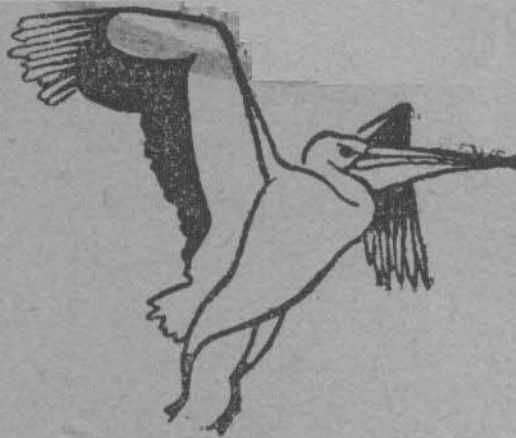
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PELICAN BOOKS

CIVILIZATION

AN ESSAY

BY
CLIVE BELL



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CIVILIZATION

BY CLIVE BELL

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DEDICATION TO VIRGINIA WOOLF

Dearest Virginia,

If I do this essay the honour of dedication to you, it is not only, not chiefly, because by the spell of your name I might hope to charm my readers. Not that I should be ashamed to owe that or any other benefit to our friendship; but in truth my motive happens to be more honourable and more interesting. It is that you alone of my friends were in at the birth and have followed the fortunes of this backward and ill-starred child. You alone know that it was the first conceived of all my brood, and that all the rest (except some collections of articles) have, in a sense, come out of it. Its conception dates from our nonage. You remember, Virginia, we were mostly socialists in those days. We were concerned for the fate of humanity. And from that concern sprang first the idea, then the rough draft, of what was to be, of course, my magnum opus, a book to deal with nothing less than every significant aspect of our age, a book to be called The New Renaissance.

'It was a childish phantasy,' as I imagine Hood says somewhere; but childish as I was I realized even then that to explain where we were it would be necessary to demonstrate whence we had come. The New Renaissance was to have given a picture of contemporary art, thought, and social organization

by tracing the history of those manifestations of civility from earliest times to the present—to 1909 say. But by 1911 I was a little wiser—a little more grown-up at any rate—and I perceived that my subject was unmanageable. Wherefore, inspired by the first and second Post-Impressionist Exhibitions, I cut out of my New Renaissance a section and published it in the spring of 1914 under the simple and comprehensive title Art.

Then came the war. And the war, with its political and economic consequences has, as you will soon perceive, modified my ideas considerably. Indeed the difference between this essay and the book about which I used to chatter in your workroom in Fitzroy Square is to be attributed mainly to that differentiating event. For, though the comedy—the spectacle, I mean, of millions of men and women trying by means of political and social organization to get what they more or less believe they want, and calling what they believe they want good—remains, the illumination is new. By the autumn of 1918 I had begun to see things differently; my opinions and beliefs had changed. The things that had seemed valuable as ends seemed so still, but much of what I had taken for possible means to those ends seemed nonsense. I saw the old problem anew; and, for a moment, my vision appeared sharp and perhaps interesting. So that autumn I pulled out the dirty manuscript and began to re-write.

Fate still was waiting for me, for it rather. Early in 1919 I found myself, through no fault of my own,

a professional art-critic and an almost professional homme d'esprit. Again the opus was abandoned. Only I extracted from it another chapter, published under the title 'On British Freedom,' which made a short, and in my opinion admirable, tract, which no one marked. And yet I would still be talking ; which is why I have carried to this quietude the 1918 manuscript and from it extracted an essay on civilization.

You shall hear no more of The New Renaissance. What remained of the manuscript after this had been extracted fed, some months ago, the central heater. Here is the gist of the old familiar argument, modified by the war, and I think by nothing else. For since the war, the Russian revolution and the Italian coup d'état, nothing has happened, and I have read nothing, seriously to alter my conception of civilization or of the means by which it might be attained. Here are the paralipomena of my better thoughts and days, gathered together, unified I hope, well bound and printed certainly, and laid at your feet, dearest Virginia, by your affectionate friend,

CLIVE BELL.

CASSIS, April 1927.

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CIVILIZATION

I

INTRODUCTION

SINCE from August 1914 to November 1918 Great Britain and her Allies were fighting for civilization it cannot, I suppose, be impertinent to enquire what precisely civilization may be. 'Liberty' and 'Justice' have always been reckoned expensive words, but that 'Civilization' could cost as much as I forget how many millions a day came as a surprise to many thoughtful tax-payers. The story of this word's rise to the highest place amongst British war aims is so curious that, even were it less relevant, I should be tempted to tell it; and in fact only by telling can I explain how this essay took final shape.

'You are fighting for civilization,' cried the wisest and best of those leaders who led us into war, and the very soldiers took up the cry, 'Join up, for civilization's sake.' Startled by this sudden enthusiasm for an abstraction in which till then politicians and recruiting-sergeants had manifested little or no interest, I, in my turn, began to cry: 'And what is civilization?' I did not cry aloud, be sure: at that time, for crying things of that sort aloud, one was sent to prison. But now that it is no longer criminal, nor unpatriotic even, to ask questions,

I intend to enquire what this thing is for which we fought and for which we pay. I propose to investigate the nature of our leading war-aim. Whether my search will end in discovery and—if it does—whether what is discovered will bear any likeness to the Treaty of Versailles remains to be seen.

If I remember right, England entered the war because Germany had violated a treaty, it being held that a European war was preferable to an unavenged injustice—*fiat justitia, ruat caelum*, let justice be done though it bring the house down. The unqualified acceptance of this formidable doctrine may well have aroused in reflective minds a sense of insecurity, which sense may have induced those publicists and politicians who had to justify to chapel-goers and liberal newspaper-readers our declaration of war to back the moral with a religious motive. Whatever the cause, that was what happened. Someone, possibly Mr. Lloyd George himself, more probably Mr. Horatio Bottomley, struck out the daring figure—‘The Cross versus Krupps.’ And as from the first the newspapers had welcomed the war as Armageddon, it stood to reason that Kaiser Wilhelm II. was Antichrist. Positively there was something Neronic about him, an alleged taste for music maybe. Besides there were prophecies, signs, and portents in the sky, and the angels pullulating at Mons, all which tended to prove that God was for us and very likely that we were against the devil. And yet, remembering His Imperial

Majesty's engaging habit of pressing into the hands of young ladies a little book called *Talks with Jesus*, some of us found the identification unconvincing. Was it quite courteous either to insist on the dogmatic issue, when the French republic was officially agnostic and the Mikado of the Shinto persuasion? And was it prudent to involve the God of the Christians too deeply in a quarrel where French infidels, Japanese miscreants, Moslems and Parsees from India, and cannibals from Senegal, were banded against that pillar of the Catholic Church, the late Emperor of Austria? So, just when we were beginning to wonder whether the war could be exactly described as a crusade, some cautious and cultivated person, a writer in *The Times Literary Supplement* I surmise, discovered that what the Allies were really up against was Nietzsche.

That discovery was, at first, a great success. Nietzsche was a butt for the high outrageous mettle of every one of us. That he was a German and a poet sufficed to put him wrong with the ruling class; and since he was said to have despised mediocrity the middle and lower had some grounds for disliking him. Down with Nietzsche! Ah, that was fun, drubbing the nasty blackguard, the man who presumed to sneer at liberals without admiring liberal-unionists. He was an epileptic, it seemed, a scrofulous fellow, and no gentleman. We told the working men about him, we told them about his being the prophet of German imperialism, the poet

of Prussia and the lickspittle of the Junkers. And were anyone who had compromised himself by dabbling in German literature so unpatriotic as to call our scholarship in question, we called him a traitor and shut him up. Those were the days, the best of 1914, when France and England were defending Paris against Nietzsche and the Russian steam-roller was catching him in the back.

And yet this holding of the fort against Nietzsche was not wholly satisfying either. For one thing it seemed depressing to be on the defensive everywhere. For another Nietzsche was so difficult to pronounce; and besides it seemed odd to be fighting against someone of whose existence, six months earlier, not one in ten thousand had heard. We wanted not merely to be fighting against things; something we wanted to be fighting for. For what? Belgium seemed too small, not to say grubby, Christianity indiscreet, the balance of power old-fashioned, ourselves improbable. We longed for a resonant, elevating and yet familiar objective; something which Christians and Agnostics, Liberals, Conservatives and Socialists, those who had always liked war and those who on principle detested it, those who doted on Marie Corelli and those who thought better of Mr. Wells, those who loved whisky and those who preferred Lady Astor, those, in a word, who took their opinions from *The Daily News* and those who took them from *The Daily Express* could all feel proud and pleased to make other people