

THE BIBLE OF CIVILIZATION

PART TWO

§ 3

In the preceding sections we have discussed Genesis and the Historical Books generally as they would appear in a modernized Bible, and we have dealt with the Law. But these are only the foundations and openings of the Bible as we know it. We come now to the Psalms and Proverbs, the Song of Songs, the Book of Job--and the Prophets. What are the modern equivalents of these books?

Well, what were they?

They were the entire Hebrew literature down to about the time of Ezra; they include sacred songs, love songs, a dramatic dialogue, a sort of novel in the Books of Ruth and Esther, and so forth. What would be our equivalent of this part of the Bible to-day? What would be the equivalent for the Bible of a world civilization?

I suppose that it would be the whole world literature.

That, I admit, is a rather tremendous proposition. Are we to contemplate the prospect of a modern Bible in twenty or thirty thousand volumes? Such a vast Bible would defeat its own end. We want a Bible that everyone will know, which will be grasped by the mind of everyone. That is essential to our idea of a Bible as a social cement.

Fortunately our model Bible, as we have it to-day, gives us a lead in this matter. Its contents are classified. We have first of all the canonical books, which are treated as the vitally important books; they are the books, to quote the phrase used in the English prayer book, which are "necessary to salvation." And then we have a collection of other books, the Apocrypha, the books set aside, books often admirable and beautiful, but not essential, good to be read for "example of life and instruction of manners," yet books that everyone need not read and know. Let us take this lead and let us ask whether we can--with the whole accumulated literature of the world as our material--select a bookful or so of matter, of such exceptional value that it would be well for all mankind to read it and know it. This will be our equivalent for the canonical Books. I will return to that in a moment.

And outside this canonical Book or Books, shall we leave all the rest of literature in a limitless Apocrypha? I am doubtful about that. I would suggest that we make a second intermediate class between the canonical books that everyone in our civilization ought to read and the outer Apocrypha that you may read or not as you choose. This intermediate class I would call the Great Books of the World. It would not be a part

of our Bible, but it would come next to our Bible. It would not be what one must read but only what it is desirable the people should read.

Now this canonical literature we are discussing is to be the third vital part of our modern Bible. I conceive of it as something that would go into the hands of every man and woman in that coming great civilization which is the dream of our race. Together with the Book of World History and the Book of Law and Righteousness and Wisdom that I have sketched out to you, and another Book of which I shall have something to say later, this canonical literature will constitute the intellectual and moral cement of the World Society, that intellectual and moral cement for the want of which our world falls into political and social confusion and disaster to-day. Upon such a basis, upon a common body of ideas, a common moral teaching and the world-wide assimilation of the same emotional and æsthetic material, it may still be possible to build up humanity into one co-operative various and understanding community.

Now if we bear this idea of a cementing function firmly in mind, we shall have a criterion by which to judge what shall be omitted from and what shall be included in the Books of Literature in this modern Bible of ours. We shall begin, of course, by levying toll upon the Old and New Testaments. I do not think I need justify that step. I suppose that there will be no doubt of the inclusion of many of the Psalms--but I question if we should include them all--and of a number of splendid passages from the Prophets. Should we include the Song of Songs? I am inclined to think that the compilers of a new Bible would hesitate at

that. Should we include the Book of Job? That I think would be a very difficult question indeed for our compilers. The Book of Job is a very wonderful and beautiful discussion of the profound problem of evil in the world. It is a tremendous exercise to read and understand, but is it universally necessary? I am disposed to think that the Book of Job, possibly with the illustrations of Blake, would not make a part of our Canon but would rank among our Great Books. It is a part of a very large literature of discussion, of which I shall have more to say in a moment. So too I question if we should make the story of Ruth or the story of Esther fundamental teaching for our world civilization. Daniel, again, I imagine relegated to the Apocrypha. But to this I will return later.

The story of the Gospels would, of course, have been incorporated in our Historical Book, but in addition as part of our first canon, each of the four gospels--with the possible omission of the genealogies--would have a place, for the sake of their matchless directness, simplicity and beauty. They give a picture, they convey an atmosphere of supreme value to us all, incommunicable in any other form or language. Again there is a great wealth of material in the Epistles. It is, for example, inconceivable that such a passage as that of St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians--"Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not charity I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal"--the whole of that wonderful chapter--should ever pass out of the common heritage of mankind.

So much from the Ancient Bible for our modern Bible, all its inspiration

and beauty and fire. And now what else?

Speaking in English to an English-speaking audience one name comes close upon the Bible, Shakespear. What are we going to do about Shakespear? If you were to waylay almost any Englishman or American and put this project of a modern Bible before him, and then begin your list of ingredients with the Bible and the whole of Shakespear, he would almost certainly say, "Yes, Yes."

But would he be right?

On reflection he might perhaps recede and say "Not the whole of Shakespear," but well, Hamlet, The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer-Night's Dream. But even these! Are they "generally necessary to salvation"? We run our minds through the treasures of Shakespear as we might run our fingers through the contents of a box of very precious and beautiful jewels--before equipping a youth for battle.

No. These things are for ornament and joy. I doubt if we could have a single play--a single scene of Shakespear's in our Canon. He goes altogether into the Great Books, all of him; he joins the aristocracy of the Apocrypha. And, I believe, nearly all the great plays of the world would have to join him there. Euripides and Sophocles, Schiller and Ibsen. Perhaps some speeches and such-like passages might be quoted in the Canon, but that is all.

Our Canon, remember, is to be the essential cementing stuff of our community and nothing more. If once we admit merely beautiful and delightful things, then I see an overwhelming inrush of jewels and flowers. If we admit A Midsummer-Night's Dream, then I must insist that we also admit such lovely nonsense as

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure dome decree,

Where Alph the sacred river ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea....

Our Canon I am afraid cannot take in such things, and with the plays we must banish also all the novels; the greater books of such writers as Cervantes, Defoe, Dickens, Fielding, Tolstoi, Hardy, Hamsun, that great succession of writers--they are all good for "example of life and instruction of manners," and to the Apocrypha they must go. And so it is that since I would banish Romeo and Juliet, I would also banish the Song of Songs, and since I must put away Vanity Fair and the Shabby Genteel Story, I would also put away Esther and Ruth. And I find myself most reluctant to exclude not any novels written in English, but one or two great sweeping books by non-English writers. It seems to me that Tolstoi's War and Peace and Hamsun's Growth of the Soil are books on an almost Biblical scale, that they deal with life so greatly as to come nearest to the idea of a universally inspiring and illuminating literature which underlies the idea of our Canon. If we put

in any whole novels into the Canon I would plead for these. But I will not plead now even for these. I do not think any novels at all can go into our modern Bible, as whole works. The possibility of long passages going in, is of course, quite a different matter.

And passing now from great plays and great novels and romances, we come to the still more difficult problem of great philosophical and critical works. Take Gulliver's Travels--an intense, dark, stirring criticism of life and social order--and the Dialogues of Plato, full of light and inspiration. In these latter we might quarry for beautiful passages for our Canon, but I do not think we could take them in as wholes, and if we do not take them in as complete books, then I think that Semitic parallel to these Greek dialogues, The Book of Job, must stand not in our Canon, but in the Great Book section of our Apocrypha.

And next we have to consider all the great Epics in the world. There again I am for exclusion. This Bible we are considering must be universally available. If it is too bulky for universal use it loses its primary function of a moral cement. We cannot include the Iliad, the Norse Sagas, the Æneid or Paradise Lost in our Canon. Let them swell the great sack of our Apocrypha, and let the children read them if they will.

When one glances in this fashion over the accumulated literary resources of mankind it becomes plain that our canonical books of literature in this modern Bible of ours can be little more than an Anthology or a

group of Anthologies. Perhaps they might be gathered under separate heads, as the 'Book of Freedom,' the 'Book of Justice,' the 'Book of Charity.' And now having done nothing as yet but reject, let me begin to accept. Let me quote a few samples of the kind of thing that I imagine would best serve the purpose of our Bible and that should certainly be included.

Here are words that every American knows by heart already--I would like every man in the world to know them by heart and to repeat them. It is Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and I will not spare you a word of it:

"Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate--we cannot consecrate--we cannot hallow--this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to

the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion. That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

And here is something that might perhaps make another short chapter in the same Book of Freedom--but it deals with Freedom of a different sort:

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud,
Under the bludgeonings of Chance,
My head is bloody but unbowed.

Beyond this Place of wrath and tears,
Looms but the Horror of the Shade,
And yet the Menace of the years
Finds and shall find me Unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the Master of my Fate,

I am the Captain of my Soul.

That, as you know, was Henley's, and as I turned up his volume of poems to copy out that poem I came again on these familiar lines:

The ways of Death are soothing and serene,
And all the words of Death are grave and sweet,
From camp and church, the fireside and the street,
She beckons forth--and strife and song have been.

A summer's night descending cool and green,
And dark on daytime's dust and stress and heat,
The ways of Death are soothing and serene,
And all the words of Death are grave and sweet.

There seems something in that also which I could spare only very reluctantly from a new Bible in the world. Yet I tender those lines very doubtfully. For I am not a very cultivated and well-read person, and note only the things that have struck upon my mind; but I quite understand that there must be many things of the same sort, but better, that I have never encountered, or that I have not heard or read under circumstances that were favourable to their proper appreciation. I would rather say about what I am quoting in this section, not positively "this thing," but merely "this sort of thing."

And in the vein of "this sort of thing" let me quote you--again for the

Book of Freedom--a passage from Milton, defending the ancient English tradition of free speech and free decision and praising London and England. This London and England of which he boasts have broadened out as the idea of Jerusalem has broadened out, to world-wide comprehensions. Let no false modesty blind us to our great tradition; you and I are still thinking in Milton's city; we continue, however unworthily, the great inheritance of the world-wide responsibility and service, of His Englishmen. Here is my passage:

"Now once again by all concurrence of signs, and by the general instinct of holy and devout men, as they daily and solemnly express their thoughts, God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in His Church, even to the reforming of reformation itself; what does He then but reveal Himself to His servants, and as His manner is, first to His Englishmen? I say, as His manner is, first to us, though we mark not the method of His counsels, and are unworthy. Behold now this vast city, a city of refuge, the mansion-house of liberty, encompassed and surrounded with His protection; the shop of war hath not there more anvils and hammers working, to fashion out the plates and instruments of armed justice in defence of beleaguered truth, than there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas wherewith to present, as with their homage and their fealty, the approaching reformation: others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement.

"What could a man require more from a nation so pliant and so prone to seek after knowledge? What wants there to such a towardly and pregnant soil, but wise and faithful labourers, to make a knowing people, a nation of prophets, of sages, and of worthies? We reckon more than five months yet to harvest; there need not be five weeks, had we but eyes to lift up, the fields are white already. Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. Under these fantastic terrors of sect and schism, we wrong the earnest and zealous thirst after knowledge and understanding, which God hath stirred up in this city. What some lament of, we rather should rejoice at, should rather praise this pious forwardness among men, to reassume the ill-deputed care of their religion into their own hands again. A little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and some grain of charity might win all these diligencies to join and unite into one general and brotherly search after truth; could we but forego this prelatical tradition of crowding free consciences and Christian liberties into canons and precepts of men. I doubt not, if some great and worthy stranger should come among us, wise to discern the mould and temper of a people, and how to govern it, observing the high hopes and aims, the diligent alacrity of our extended thoughts and reasonings in the pursuance of truth and freedom, but that he would cry out as

Pyrrhus did, admiring the Roman docility and courage: 'If such were my Epirots, I would not despair the greatest design that could be attempted to make a church or kingdom happy.'

"Yet these are the men cried out against for schismatics and sectaries, as if, while the temple of the Lord was building, some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars, there should be a sort of irrational men, who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber ere the house of God can be built. And when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world: neither can every piece of the building be of one form; nay, rather the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportional, arises the goodly and the graceful symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure."

But I will not go on turning over the pages of books and reciting prose and poetry to you. I cannot even begin to remind you of the immense treasure of noble and ennobling prose and verse that this world has accumulated in the past three thousand years. Not one soul in ten thousand that is born into this world even tastes from that store. For most of mankind now that treasure is as if it had never been. Is it too much to suggest that we should make some organized attempt to gather up the quintessence of literature now, and make it accessible to the masses

of our race? Why should we not on a large scale with a certain breadth and dignity set about compiling the Poetic Books, the Books of Inspiration for a renewed Bible, for a Bible of Civilization? It seems to me that such a Book made universally accessible, made a basis of teaching everywhere could set the key of the whole world's thought.

§ 4 Today

There remains one other element if we are to complete the parallelism of the old Bible and the new. The Christian Bible ends with a forecast, the Book of Revelation; the Hebrew Bible ended also with forecasts, the Prophets. To that the old Bible owed much of its magic power over men's imaginations and the inspiration it gave them. It was not a dead record, not an accumulation of things finished and of songs sung. It pointed steadily and plainly to the Days to Come as the end and explanation of all that went before. So too our Modern Bible, if it is to hold and rule the imagination of men, must close I think with a Book of Forecasts. We want to make our world think more than it does about the consequences of the lives it leads and the political deeds that it does and that it permits to be done. We want to turn the human imagination round again towards the future which our lives create. We want a collection and digest of forecasts and warnings to complete this modern Bible of ours. Now here I think you will say--and I admit with perfect reason--that I am floating away from any reasonable possibility at all. How can we have forecasts and prophecies of things that are happening now? Well, I will

make a clean breast of it, and admit that I am asking for something that may be impossible. Nevertheless it is something that is very necessary if men are to remain indeed intelligent co-operating communities. In the past you will find where there have been orderly and successful communities the men in them had an idea of a Destiny, of some object, something that would amount to a criterion and judgment upon their collective conduct. Well, I believe that we have to get back to something of that sort.

We have statesmen and politicians who profess to guide our destinies. Whither are they guiding our destinies?

Surely they have some idea. The great American statesmen and the great European statesmen are making To-morrow. What is the To-morrow they are making?

They must have some idea of it. Otherwise they must be imposters. I am loth to believe them imposters, mere adventurers who have blundered into positions of power and honour with no idea of what they are doing to the world. But if they have an idea of what they are doing to the world, they foresee and intend a Future. That, I take it, is sound reasoning and the inference is plain.

They ought to write down their ideas of this Future before us. It would be helpful to all of us. It might be a very helpful exercise for them.

It is, I think, reasonable for Americans to ask the great political

personages of America, the president and so forth, for example: whether they think the United States will stand alone in twenty-five years' time as they stand alone now? Or whether they think that there will be a greater United States--of all America--or of all the world? They must know their own will about that. And it is equally reasonable to ask the great political personages of the British Empire: what will Ireland be in twenty-five years' time? What will India be? There must be a plan, an intended thing. Otherwise these men have no intentions; otherwise they must be, in two words, dangerous fools. The sooner we substitute a type of man with a sufficient foresight and capable of articulate speech in the matter, the better for our race.

And again every statesman and every politician throughout the world says that the relations of industrial enterprise to the labour it employs are unsatisfactory. Yes. But how are those relations going to develop? How do they mean them to develop?

Are we just drifting into an unknown darkness in all these matters with blind leaders of our blindness? Or cannot a lot of these things be figured out by able and intelligent people? I put it to you that they can. That it is a reasonable and proper thing to ask our statesmen and politicians: what is going to happen to the world? What sort of better social order are you making for? What sort of world order are you creating? Let them open their minds to us, let them put upon permanent record the significance of all their intrigues and manoeuvres. Then as they go on we can check their capacity and good faith. We can establish

a control at last that will rule presidents and kings.

Now the answer to these questions for statesmen is what I mean by a Book of Forecasts. Such a book I believe is urgently needed to help our civilization. It is a book we ought all to possess and read. I know you will say that such a Book of Forecasts will be at first a preposterously insufficient book--that every year will show it up and make it more absurd. I quite agree. The first Book of Forecasts will be a poor thing. Miserably poor. So poor that people will presently clamour to have it thoroughly revised.

The revised Book of Forecasts will not be quite so bad. It will have been tested against realities. It will form the basis of a vast amount of criticism and discussion.

When again it comes to be revised, it will be much nearer possible realities.

I put it to you that the psychology, the mentality of a community that has a Book of Forecasts in hand and under watchful revision will be altogether steadier and stronger and clearer than that of a community which lives as we do to-day, mere adventurers, without foresight, in a world of catastrophies and accidents and unexpected things. We shall be living again in a plan. Our lives will be shaped to certain defined ends. We shall fall into place in a great scheme of activities. We shall recover again some or all of the steadfastness and dignity of the old

religious life.

§ 5 Today

Let me with this Book of Forecasts round off my fantasy. I would picture to you this modern Bible, perhaps two or three times as bulky as the old Bible, and consisting first of

The Historical Books with maps and the like;

The Books of Conduct and Wisdom;

The Anthologies of Poetry and Literature; and finally the

Book of Forecasts, taking the place of the Prophets and Revelations.

I would picture this revived Bible to you as most carefully done and printed and made accessible to all, the basis of education in every school, the common platform of all discussion--just as in the past the old Bible used to be. I would ask you to imagine it translated into every language, a common material of understanding throughout all the world.

And furthermore, I imagine something else about this--quite unlike the old Bible--I imagine all of it periodically revised. The historical books would need to be revised and brought up to date, there would be new lights on health and conduct, there would be fresh additions to the anthologies, and there would be Forecasts that would have to be struck out because they were realized or because they were shown to be hopeless or undesirable, and fresh Forecasts would be added to replace them. It would be a Bible moving forward and changing and gaining with human

experience and human destiny....

Well, that is my dream of a Bible of Civilization. Have I in any way carried my vision out to you of this little row of four or five volumes in every house, in every life, throughout the world, holding the lives and ideas and imaginations of men together in a net of common familiar phrases and common established hopes?

And is this a mere fantastic talk, or is this a thing that could be done and that ought to be done?

I do not know how it will appear to you, but to me it seems that this book I have been talking about, the Bible of to-day's civilization, is not simply a conceivable possibility, it is a great and urgent need. Our education is, I think, pointless without it, a shell without a core. Our social life is aimless without it, we are a crowd without a common understanding. Only by means of some such unifying instrument, I believe, can we hope to lift human life out of its present dangerous drift towards confusion and disaster.

It is, I think therefore, an urgently desirable undertaking.

It is also a very practicable one. The creation of such a Bible, its printing and its translation, and a propaganda that would carry it into the homes and schools of most of the world, could I think all be achieved by a few hundred resolute and capable people at a cost of

thirty or forty million dollars. That is a less sum than that the United States--in a time when they have no enemy to fear in all the world--are prepared to spend upon the building of what is for them an entirely superfluous and extravagant toy, a great navy.

You may, you probably will, differ very widely upon much that I have here put before you. Let me ask you not to let any of the details of my sketching set you against the fundamental idea, that old creative idea of the Bohemian educationist who was the pupil of Bacon and the friend of Milton, the idea of Komensky, the idea of creating and using a common book, a book of knowledge and wisdom, as the necessary foundation for any enduring human unanimity.