

other post-renaissance civilizations have an air distinctly provincial. Yet, face to face with the rest of the world, France is provincial herself. Here is a puzzle; a solution of which, if it is to be attempted at all, must be attempted in another article.

CLIVE BELL.

## A Slacker's Apology

**D**EAR FRIEND: Your letter gently but unmistakably intimates that I am a slacker, a slacker in peace as well as in war; that when the world war was raging bitterly I dawdled my time with subjects like symbolic logic, and that now when the issues of reconstructing a bleeding world demand the efforts of all who care for the future of the human race, I am shirking my responsibility and wasting my time with Plato and Cicero. Your sweetly veiled charge is true, but I do not feel ashamed of it. On the contrary, when I look upon my professional colleagues who enlisted their philosophies in the war, who added their shrill voices to the roar of the cannons and their little drops of venom to the torrents of national hatreds, I feel that it is they who should write apologies for their course. For philosophers, I take it, are ordained as priests to keep alive the sacred fires in the altar of impartial truth, and I have but faithfully endeavored to keep my oath of office as well as the circumstances would permit. It is doubtless the height of the unheroic to worship truth in the bomb proof of harmless mathematics when men are giving their lives for democracy and for the public order which is the basis of civilization. But it would be sad if all the priests deserted their altars and became soldiers, if the sermon on the mount were utterly erased to give place to manuals of bayonet practice or instructions on the use of poison gas. What avails it to beat the enemy if the sacred fires which we are sworn to defend meanwhile languish and die for want of attendance?

Impartial Truth is a goddess whose worship is not without its difficulties even in a bomb proof behind the lines. She is hated by the great multitude of the impatient and despised by those superior persons who disdain her as oldfashioned. But as her sworn votary I cannot deny her. When the Germans burned Louvain I could not forget what the Allies had done in 1900 to the Imperial Library at Peking, and when they sank the Lusitania I could not deny the women and children starved by the blockade. I did not ignore the difference of degree in moral turpitude, and as a citizen I should have been glad, if conditions permitted, to volunteer for military service. But though I could conscript my

body I could not conscript my mind. As a philosopher I could never assert that the war was a clear issue between the powers of light and the powers of darkness, or as Bergson put it, between the mind or spirit on one side and brute matter on the other. I could never get myself to say that Japan had a better right to Shantung than Germany or that it was better that Poles should oppress Russians and Germans than that the latter should be the oppressors. I could never believe that the world's iniquity would end the moment the Kaiser (or any other "boss") were overthrown. Some there were who insisted that it was my duty to shout these doubts of mine from the roof tops. But I could not do this any more than I could shout them to the Germans across the barbed-wire entanglements. I believe in the division of labor. I am a priest or philosopher, not a soldier or propagandist. I yield to none in my admiration for the brave fellows who gave their all on the bloody fields of Flanders, but I have no respect for the bigots who cannot realize that "there are many mansions in my Father's house," and that it would be a poor world if there were no diversity of function to suit the diversity of natural aptitudes. And when people begin to admonish me that if everyone did as I did, etc., I answer that humanity would probably perish from cold if everyone produced food, and would certainly starve if everyone made clothes or built houses. I admit the desperate need of men to defend the existence of our country, but I cannot ignore the need of men to maintain even in war the things which make the country worth defending. Purely theoretic studies seem to me to be of those fine flowers which relieve the drabness of our existence and help to make the human scene worth while.

I am aware, dear friend, that in my high valuation of purely theoretic pursuits I have the weight of contemporary authority against me. My fellow philosophers for the most part are too ready to assert that theoretic philosophy can justify itself only by its practical applications. But why the fundamental human desire to know the world is any less entitled to satisfaction than the desire for kodaks, automobiles, india-paper or upholstered furniture, they do not tell us. Indeed, just exactly what is practical, and what is the good of being practical at all, are just the kind of theoretic studies that they frantically refuse to undertake. I strongly suspect that in this they are influenced not only by the Puritanic aversion for the arts of free play, but also by the unenlightened prejudice that the bare necessities of life are more important than the "luxuries" which by giving life beauty and dignity make the struggle for it worth while to free men.

Our excessive specialization tends to make us

blind to that which is outside our interests, and, hence, fiercely intolerant. I have seen lumberjacks laugh to scorn an artist who was trying to fix on canvas some of the haunting beauty in the gloaming of the woods; and we have on public record the contempt of the aluminum manufacturers for those sentimentalists who want to preserve the scenic sublimity of Niagara Falls. It is just as natural for statesmen and journalists absorbed in the problems of the war and the League of Nations to scorn those who have other interests. But there are plenty of historic precedents to justify some scepticism as to the infallibility of the prevailing judgment as to what is fundamentally important. Don't you now think the discovery of certain mathematical propositions by Archimedes to be more important than the siege and capture of Syracuse? They used to scorn Hegel for being concerned with his Phenomenology while the fate of Germany was being sealed at Jena almost at his very door. Yet history has shown the appearance of Hegel's unearthly book to have been of greater importance than the battle of Jena. The results of the latter were wiped out within seven years, while the results of Hegel's thought will for good or evil last for many years to come. When Darwin published his *Descent of Man* at the end of the Franco-Prussian War, the authoritative London Times, I think, took him severely to task! When the foundations of property and the established order are threatened by the fires of the Paris Commune, how can a patriotic gentleman concern himself with inquiries that are in no wise calculated to help or comfort those who have a stake in the country? Would anyone to-day defend that attitude?

If I had your persuasive talent, dear friend, and cared to exalt one human interest above others, I would contend that the really important issue before the American people today is not economic or political but moral and vital—the issue of Puritanism. It is the Puritanic feeling of responsibility which has blighted our art and philosophy and has made us as a people unskilled in the art of enjoying life. (No one who witnessed our victory celebrations will here ask for proof.) By making daily existence dreary and depressed it drove people to strong drink, and now it deprives people of their drink without inquiring into its cause or function. But I have no desire to brand as slackers those who will not enlist in the fight against Puritanism. What I wish to suggest is some modicum of doubt as to the complacent assumption that only by absorption in some contemporary social problem can the philosopher justify his existence. The great philosophers, like the great artists, scientists and religious teachers have all, in large measure, ignored their

contemporary social problems. Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Newton, Buddha, Jesus of Nazareth and others who have done so much to heighten the quality of human life, have very little to say about the actual international, economic and political readjustments which were as pressing in their day as in ours. The great service of Socrates to humanity was surely not in his somewhat superficial criticism of the Athenian electoral machinery of his day, but rather in developing certain intellectual methods, and suggesting to Plato certain doctrines as to the nature of the soul and ideas,—doctrines which in spite of all their impracticality have served for over two thousand years to raise men above the grovelling, clawing existence in which so much of our life is sunk. I know that Plato's otherworldliness is decidedly out of fashion. We believe nowadays that by progressive mechanical inventions and by some happy economico-political device we can bring about the reign of complete justice and happiness. Far be it from me to disparage this modern faith. As a great hope sanctified by the supposed evidence of "scientific" evolution, it is to many a real sustaining force in the presence of otherwise intolerable evil. But to fit all our hope on some temporal affair like the League of Nations is to leave us helpless when we come to the inevitable harvest of disappointment. We hold the benefits of civilization not in fee simple, to our heirs forever, but by knights' service. Much as we may leave to our successors we can never manage it so that they shall be entirely free from toil, pain and the agonies of death. Let us not, therefore, wilfully impoverish their life by throwing away any of the things which have served as consolations to so many since the ancient days—among which are the writings of the divine Plato and even of the altogether unheroic Cicero, who so tragically illustrates the failure of scholars in politics.

Yours, etc.,

PHILONOUS.

### The Young Man and the Old Woman

Old woman why laugh  
When the world is so grey,  
And the corn and the chaff  
Are not easy to say?  
It were fitter you wept  
Or made hurry to pray.

Young man, I've no tears  
Though the world is so cold,  
For the length of my years  
Is a tale that is told.  
You may weep, for you're young,  
But I laugh, for I'm old.

ST. JOHN ERVINE.

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