ON CULTURE & SOCIETY

A Reader

Edward Carpenter

Introduction By
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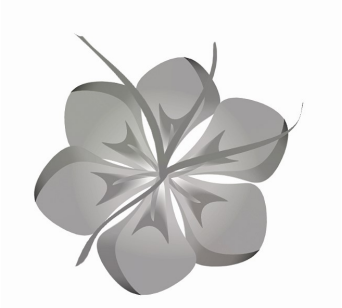

AZAFRAN BOOKS

CIVILISATION: ITS CAUSE AND CURE

AND OTHER ESSAYS

(NEWLY-ENLARGED AND COMPLETE EDITION)

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CIVILISATION: ITS CAUSE AND CURE

The friendly and flowing savage, who is he? Is he waiting
for civilisation, or is he past it, and mastering it?—WHITMAN.

WE find ourselves to-day in the midst of a somewhat peculiar state of society, which we call Civilisation, but which even to the most optimistic among us does not seem altogether desirable. Some of us, indeed, are inclined to think that it is a kind of disease which the various races of man have to pass through—as children pass through measles or whooping cough; but if it is a disease, there is this serious consideration to be made, that while History tells us of many nations that have been attacked by it, of many that have succumbed to it, and of some that are still in the throes of it, we know of no single case in which a nation has fairly recovered from and passed through it to a more normal and healthy condition. In other words the development of human society has never yet (that we know of) passed beyond a certain definite and apparently final stage in the process we call Civilisation; at that stage it has always succumbed or been arrested.

Of course it may at first sound extravagant to use the word disease in connection with Civilisation at all, but a little thought should show that the association is not ill-grounded. To take the matter on its physical side first, I find that in Mullhall's Dictionary of Statistics (1884) the number of accredited doctors and surgeons in the United Kingdom is put at over 23,000. If the extent of the national sickness is such that we require 23,000 medical men to attend to us, it must surely be rather serious! And *they* do not cure us. Wherever we look to-day, in mansion or in slum, we see the features and hear the complaints of ill-health; the difficulty is really to find a healthy person. The state of the modern civilised man in this respect—our coughs, colds, mufflers, dread of a waft of chill air, etc.—is anything but creditable, and it seems to be the fact that, notwithstanding all our libraries of medical science, our knowledges, arts, and appliances of life, we are actually less capable of taking care of ourselves than the animals are. Indeed, talking of animals, we are—as Shelley I think points out—fast depraving the *domestic* breeds. The cow, the horse, the sheep, and even the confiding pussy-cat, are becoming ever more and more subject to disease, and are liable to ills which in their wilder state they knew not of. And finally the savage races of the earth do not escape the baneful influence. Wherever Civilisation touches them, they die like flies from the small-pox, drink, and worse evils it brings along with it, and often its mere contact is sufficient to destroy whole races.

But the word Disease is applicable to our social as well as to our physical condition. For as in the body disease arises from the loss of the physical unity which constitutes Health, and so takes the form of warfare or discord between the various parts, or of the abnormal development of individual organs, or the consumption of the system by predatory germs and growths; so in our modern life we find the unity gone which constitutes true society, and in its place warfare of classes and individuals, abnormal development of some to the detriment of others, and consumption of the organism by masses of social parasites. If the word disease is applicable anywhere, I should say it is—both in its direct and its derived sense—to the civilised societies of to-day.

Again, mentally, is not our condition most unsatisfactory? I am not alluding to the number and importance of the lunatic asylums which cover our land, nor to the fact that maladies of the brain and nervous system are now so common; but to the strange sense of mental unrest which marks our populations, and which amply justifies Ruskin's cutting epigram: that our two objects in life are, "Whatever we have—to get more; and wherever we are—to go somewhere else." This sense of unrest, of disease, penetrates down even into the deepest regions of man's being—into his moral nature—disclosing itself there, as it has done in all nations notably at the time of their full civilisation, as the sense of Sin.[1] All down the Christian centuries we find this strange sense of inward strife and discord developed, in marked contrast to the naive insouciance of the pagan and primitive world; and, what is strangest, we even find people glorying in this consciousness—which, while it may be the harbinger of better things to come, is and can be in itself only the evidence of loss of unity, and therefore of ill-health, in the very centre of human life.

Of course we are aware with regard to Civilisation that the word is sometimes used in a kind of ideal sense, as to indicate a state of future culture towards which we are tending—the implied assumption being that a sufficiently long course of top hats and telephones will in the end bring us to this ideal condition; while any little drawbacks in the process, such as we have just pointed out, are explained as being merely accidental and temporary. Men sometimes speak of civilising and ennobling influences as if the two terms were interchangeable, and of course if they like to use the word Civilisation in this sense they have a right to; but whether the actual tendencies of modern life taken in the mass *are* ennobling (except in a quite indirect way hereafter to be dwelt upon) is, to say the least, a doubtful question. Any one who would get an idea of the glorious being that is as a matter of fact being turned out by the present process should read Mr. Kay Robinson's article in the *Nineteenth Century* for May, 1883, in which he prophesies (quite solemnly and in the name of science) that the human

being of the future will be a toothless, bald, toeless creature with flaccid muscles and limbs almost incapable of locomotion!

Perhaps it is safer on the whole not to use the word Civilisation in such ideal sense, but to limit its use (as is done to-day by all writers on primitive society) to a definite historical stage through which the various nations pass, and in which we actually find ourselves at the present time. Though there is of course a difficulty in marking the commencement of any period of historical evolution very definitely, yet all students of this subject agree that the growth of property and the ideas and institutions flowing from it did at a certain point bring about such a change in the structure of human society that the new stage might fairly be distinguished from the earlier stages of Savagery and Barbarism by a separate term. The growth of Wealth, it is shown, and with it the conception of Private Property, brought on certain very definite new forms of social life; it destroyed the ancient system of society based upon the *gens*, that is, a society of equals founded upon blood-relationship, and introduced a society of classes founded upon differences of material possession; it destroyed the ancient system of mother-right and inheritance through the female line, and turned the woman into the property of the man; it brought with it private ownership of land, and so created a class of landless aliens, and a whole system of rent, mortgage, interest, etc.; it introduced slavery, serfdom and wage-labour, which are only various forms of the dominance of one class over another; and to rivet these authorities it created the State and the policeman. Every race that we know, that has become what we call civilised, has passed through these changes; and though the details may vary and have varied a little, the main order of change has been practically the same in all cases. We are justified therefore in calling Civilisation a historical stage, whose commencement dates roughly from the division of society into classes founded on property and the adoption of class-government. Lewis Morgan in his *Ancient Society* adds the invention of writing and the consequent adoption of written History and written Law; Engels in his *Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigenthums und des Staats* points out the importance of the appearance of the Merchant, even in his most primitive form, as a mark of the civilisation-period; while the French writers of the last century made a good point in inventing the term *nations policées* (policemanised nations) as a substitute for civilised nations; for perhaps there is no better or more universal mark of the period we are considering, and of its social degradation, than the appearance of the crawling phenomenon in question. [Imagine the rage of any decent North American Indians if they had been told they required *policemen* to keep them in order!]

If we take this historical definition of Civilisation, we shall see that our English Civilisation began hardly more than a thousand years ago, and even so the remains of the more primitive society lasted long after that. In the

case of Rome—if we reckon from the later times of the early kings down to the fall of Rome—we have again about a thousand years. The Jewish civilisation from David and Solomon downwards lasted—with breaks—somewhat over a thousand years; the Greek civilisation less; the series of Egyptian civilisations which we can now distinguish lasted altogether very much longer; but the important points to see are, first, that the process has been quite similar in character in these various (and numerous other) cases,[2] quite as similar in fact as the course of the same disease in various persons; and secondly that in no case, as said before, has any nation come *through* and passed beyond this stage; but that in most cases it has succumbed soon after the main symptoms had been developed.

But it will be said, It may be true that Civilisation regarded as a stage of human history presents some features of disease; but is there any reason for supposing that disease in some form or other was any less present in the previous stage—that of Barbarism? To which I reply, I think there is good reason. Without committing ourselves to the unlikely theory that the "noble savage" was an ideal human being physically or in any other respect, and while certain that in many points he was decidedly inferior to the civilised man, I think we must allow him the superiority in some directions; and one of these was his comparative freedom from disease. Lewis Morgan, who grew up among the Iroquois Indians, and who probably knew the North American natives as well as any white man has ever done, says (in his *Ancient Society*, p. 45), "Barbarism ends with the production of grand Barbarians." And though there are no native races on the earth to-day who are actually in the latest and most advanced stage of Barbarism;[3] yet, if we take the most advanced tribes that we know of—such as the said Iroquois Indians of twenty or thirty years ago, some of the Kaffir tribes round Lake Nyassa in Africa, now (and possibly for a few years more) comparatively untouched by civilisation, or the tribes along the river Uaupes, thirty or forty years back, of Wallace's *Travels on the Amazon*—all tribes in what Morgan would call the *middle* stage of Barbarism—we undoubtedly in each case discover a fine and (which is our point here) *healthy* people. Captain Cook in his first Voyage says of the natives of Otaheite, "We saw no critical disease during our stay upon the island, and but few instances of sickness, which were accidental fits of the colic;" and, later on, of the New Zealanders, "They enjoy perfect and uninterrupted health. In all our visits to their towns, where young and old, men and women, crowded about us ... we never saw a single person who appeared to have any bodily complaint, nor among the numbers we have seen naked did we once perceive the slightest eruption upon the skin, or any marks that an eruption had left behind." These are pretty strong words. Of course diseases exist among such peoples, even where they have never been in contact with civilisation, but I think we may say that among the higher types of savages they are rarer, and nothing like so various and so

prevalent as they are in our modern life; while the power of recovery from *wounds* (which are of course the most frequent form of disablement) is generally admitted to be something astonishing. Speaking of the Kaffirs, J. G. Wood says, "Their state of health enables them to survive injuries which would be almost instantly fatal to any civilised European." Mr. Frank Oates in his Diary[4] mentions the case of a man who was condemned to death by the king. He was hacked down with axes, and left for dead. "What must have been intended for the *coup de grâce* was a cut in the back of the head, which had chipped a large piece out of the skull, and must have been meant to cut the spinal cord where it joins the brain. It had, however, been made a little higher than this, but had left such a wound as I should have thought that no one could have survived ... when I held the lanthorn to investigate the wound I started back in amazement to see a hole at the base of the skull, perhaps two inches long and an inch and a half wide, and I will not venture to say how deep, but the depth too must have been an affair of inches. Of course this hole penetrated into the substance of the brain, and probably for some distance. I dare say a mouse could have sat in it." Yet the man was not so much disconcerted. Like Old King Cole, "He asked for a pipe and a drink of brandy," and ultimately made a perfect recovery! Of course it might be said that such a story only proves the lowness of organisation of the brains of savages; but to the Kaffirs at any rate this would not apply; they are a quick-witted race, with large brains, and exceedingly acute in argument, as Colenso found to his cost. Another point which indicates superabundant health is the amazing animal spirits of these native races! The shouting, singing, dancing kept up nights long among the Kaffirs are exhausting merely to witness, while the graver North American Indian exhibits a corresponding power of life in his eagerness for battle or his stoic resistance of pain.[5]

Similarly when we come to consider the social life of the wilder races—however rudimentary and undeveloped it may be—the almost universal testimony of students and travelers is that within its limits it is more harmonious and compact than that of the civilised nations. The members of the tribe are not organically at warfare with each other; society is not divided into classes which prey upon each other; nor is it consumed by parasites. There is more true social unity, less of disease. Though the customs of each tribe are rigid, absurd, and often frightfully cruel,[6] and though all outsiders are liable to be regarded as enemies, yet *within those limits* the members live peacefully together—their pursuits, their work, are undertaken in common, thieving and violence are rare, social feeling and community of interest are strong. "In their own bands Indians are perfectly honest. In all my intercourse with them I have heard of not over half-a-dozen cases of such theft. But this wonderfully exceptional honesty extends no further than to the members of his immediate band. To all outside of it, the Indian is not

only one of the most arrant thieves in the world, but this quality or faculty is held in the highest estimation." (Dodge, p. 64.) If a man set out on a journey (this among the Kaffirs) "he need not trouble himself about provisions, for he is sure to fall in with some hut, or perhaps a village, and is equally sure of obtaining both food and shelter."[7] "I have lived," says A. R. Wallace in his *Malay Archipelago* vol. ii. p. 460, "with communities in South America and the East, who have no laws or law courts, but the public opinion of the village ... yet each man scrupulously respects the rights of his fellows, and any infraction of those rights rarely takes place. In such a community all are nearly equal. There are none of those wide distinctions of education and ignorance, wealth and poverty, master and servant, which are the product of our civilisation." Indeed this *community* of life in the early societies, this absence of division into classes, and of the contrast between rich and poor, is now admitted on all sides as a marked feature of difference between the conditions of the primitive and of civilised man.[8]

Lastly, with regard to the mental condition of the Barbarian, probably no one will be found to dispute the contention that he is more easy-minded and that his consciousness of Sin is less developed than in his civilised brother. Our unrest is the penalty we pay for our wider life. The missionary retires routed from the savage in whom he can awake no sense of his supreme wickedness. An American lady had a servant, a negro-woman, who on one occasion asked leave of absence for the next morning, saying she wished to attend the Holy Communion? "I have no objection," said the mistress, "to grant you leave; but do you think you *ought* to attend Communion? You know you have never said you were sorry about that goose you stole last week." "Lor' missus," replied the woman, "do ye think I'd let an old goose stand betwixt me and my Blessed Lord and Master?" But joking apart, and however necessary for man's ultimate evolution may be the temporary development of this consciousness of Sin, we cannot help seeing that the condition of the mind in which it is absent is the most distinctively *healthy*; nor can it be concealed that some of the greatest works of Art have been produced by people like the earlier Greeks, in whom it was absent; and could not possibly have been produced where it was strongly developed.

Though, as already said, the latest stage of Barbarism, *i.e.*, that just preceding Civilisation, is unrepresented on the earth to-day, yet we have in the Homeric and other dawn-literature of the various nations indirect records of this stage; and these records assure us of a condition of man very similar to, though somewhat more developed than, the condition of the existing races I have mentioned above. Besides this, we have in the numerous traditions of the Golden Age,[9] legends of the Fall, etc., a curious fact which suggests to us that a great number of races in advancing towards Civilisation were conscious at some point or other of having lost a primitive condition of ease and contentment, and that they embodied this consciousness, with poetical

adornment and licence, in imaginative legends of the earlier Paradise. Some people indeed, seeing the universality of these stories, and the remarkable fragments of wisdom embedded in them and other extremely ancient myths and writings, have supposed that there really was a general pre-historic Eden-garden or Atlantis; but the necessities of the case hardly seem to compel this supposition. That each human soul, however, bears within itself some kind of reminiscence of a more harmonious and perfect state of being, which it has at some time experienced, seems to me a conclusion difficult to avoid; and this by itself might give rise to manifold traditions and myths.