

A FINE ADVENTURE IN IDEAS

By Benjamin De Casseres

IN the essay on "Civilization", in Havelock Ellis's new book "The Philosophy of Conflict and Other Essays in War-Time", the author says:

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"It is dangerous to leap to conclusions about anything in this world, most of all when Man and his civilization are concerned." It is this sentence that gives us the keynote to the intelligence of Havelock Ellis himself, and makes of him one of the most stimulating and profound writers of the time. He might have added that it is also dangerous not to leap to conclusions about anything; and as Mr. Ellis never does, it makes of him one of the most delightfully dangerous thinkers of the time. His breadth, tolerance, and spiritual cosmopolitanism leave everything from the divinity of Christ to Bolshevism open matters. There is always room for your own dogma or your own nihilism between the lines of his writings; and when he affirms his belief in spiritual progress, one feels that he does so because there is as much danger in leaping to that conclusion as there is in the doctrine of the ultimate and imminent "demnition bow-wows" of things social and celestial.

Havelock Ellis, like the two great French thinkers that he is always quoting, Remy de Gourmont and Jules de Gaultier, is a disassociater of ideas, a picklock of the brain, a thinker forever prying apart feelings and ideas long married and finding for them more suitable mates. When he has found them he leaves them with a smile, saying: "Maybe you'll be happier in the new bond; maybe not—God bless you both, anyhow!"

He is that rarest of products in English thought—a man without a program or a system, although there are inklings in his latest book that he is edging toward a modified socialism; not because, I suspect, he believes in the collective ideal as a solvent of any ills, but because his soul of experimental scientist and psychologist

takes a delight in watching the result of any new combinations of the elements that make up the endless drama of Man. He is thus not a moralist, but something infinitely greater—an æsthetic spectator of Life in the manner of Gœthe, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Jules de Gaultier; a being to whom nothing that is human is foreign; a tourist in all intellectual, emotional, and spiritual climes; a man who would crave immortality as a gift if he could only sit on the hub of the stupendous wheel of Change and make notes on the Charivari of the Eternal Becoming.

His style is as clear as the great French prose masters, rising at times to a quiet and contained lyricism which carries on its crest blazing images and fulgurant quotations culled from the depths of a culture that seems coextensive with the evolution of man.

This latest book of Havelock Ellis is a fine adventure in ideas. There are twenty-four essays in the book, ranging from the "Origin of War" and "Cowley" to birth-control and Baudelaire. The lustres of his mind throw a blazing light on the River Drift Man, illuminating the landscape of that lost age with brilliant flashes, only to turn them a moment later into the lairs and dens of the subconscious world. He glorifies Man as the epic of Time, holding a brief for the wayward wraith against the pessimists and cynics. Civilization? Is it a failure? Well, there were civilizations that failed before only to be born again under another and more colorful form. Another civilization will be born out of this one. Each civilization believes it is the first or the last. We are all foolish egoists! France and Shakespeare's plays, together with New York and the paintings of Ve-

lasquez shall fade away and leave not a wrack behind. It is well, for newer glories shall be born out of the pulsing heart of the Eternal Mother so long as the atoms dance and combine. Have faith in calamities! Havelock Ellis celebrates Europe—"the cockpit of the world"—as the stage where Man came to individual self-consciousness. Instead of merely worshipping gods, like the East, the Europeans have acted like gods, using forces instead of deifying them. Instead of getting lost in Nirvana, they have condensed it to shape and form in their blood and sweat. The European is the real superman of the races and the Yogis of the East are renegades.

In his chapter "Drink Programme of the Future" he is, of course, opposed to prohibition. Thirst is mightier than the pen, and will outlast it. There is a fine chapter in the book on Freud and psychoanalysis. He says that "the human soul will never again be to human eyes what it was before Freud explored it." In reading Havelock Ellis I am conscious of "more light", and the humor of Michel de Montaigne.

The Philosophy of Conflict. By Havelock Ellis. Houghton Mifflin Co.