

EVELYN WAUGH AND BLIMP

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SITTING in club rooms, with cigars and brandy at call, there is a stage in the evening when old colonels talking to younger officers will glance through the day's news, saying: 'World's over-populated, you know. Needs a blood-bath now and then. Terrible things, wars, but they have to be. We've had our go. Be your turn soon.' If the secret thus handed down from generation to generation is a professional one, at least it has the merits of being an open one; and, easy as such a secret is to scoff at, there is still a good deal of sense in it—even though that sense may be considered by some to be a primitive kind of horse-sense. For it conjures up a picture of the world such as it might be today had the Incarnation not yet occurred and, viewed from different angles, this is a theme which has interested Mr Evelyn Waugh for the past two decades.

In *Vile Bodies* (1930) one comes across its first statement:

'What war?' said the Prime Minister sharply. 'No one has said anything to me about a war. I really think I should have been told. I'll be damned', he said defiantly, 'if they shall have a war without consulting me. What's a Cabinet for if there's not more mutual confidence than that? What do they want a war for, anyway?'

'That's the whole point. No one talks about it, and no one wants it. No one talks about it *because* no one wants it. They're all afraid to breathe a word about it.'

'Well, hang it all, if no one wants it, who's going to make them have it?'

'Wars don't start nowadays because people want them. We long for peace, and fill our newspapers with conferences about disarmament and arbitration, but there is radical instability in our whole world order, and soon we shall all be walking into the jaws of destruction again, protesting our pacific intentions.'

But in club rooms old colonels are not frightened to breathe a word about war to younger officers because it is all part of their mutual profession—a profession which, if the hunter and warrior are accepted as its early forbears, is as ancient as man himself. For, if Colonel Blimp has become largely a music-hall figure of fun, many of the stock utterances for which he was gayed in the '30s have become painfully

true in the last fifteen years. There has always been something of Colonel Blimp in Mr Waugh, but in the main it has always been the better side of Blimperiness—such as a strong belief and insistence upon the hierarchical ordering of any society that is worth its salt.

Admittedly it is dangerous to prophesy what authors will do next, but *Men at Arms*,¹ the first of a trilogy, is a novel about military life, and the fact that it is does not come as a total surprise: 'it is part of a love affair', the author confesses, 'full of vicissitudes, between a civilian and the army' and much of his first instalment reads as a reworking over of themes touched upon before. In Mr Waugh's canon, it is a book of echoes.

Mr Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928), bore the prefatory note: 'Please bear in mind throughout that it is meant to be funny'. The book was, and although in his latest piece of fiction there are scenes as funny as any in the early books, this time they are spaced much farther apart, there being what appear—at this stage of the plan revealed in *Men at Arms*—long low-toned stretches of prose narrative that lack the essential of binding tautness. The barbs, however, when they do come are as sharp as ever and on the fourth page there is one which might have come straight from *Scoop* (1933):

The town changed a little but neither railway nor high road touched that happy peninsula [Santa Dulcina, Italy]. A few more foreigners built their villas there. The inn enlarged itself, installed sanitation of a sort and a café-restaurant, took the name of 'Hotel Eden' and abruptly changed it during the Abyssinian crisis to 'Albergo del Sol'.

Yet as a whole this prologue of forty-four pages has a certain tired atmosphere about it and is as tedious—though for different reasons—as was much of *Helena* (1950). What good moments there are, are gone all too quickly, like birds in flight—an apt simile, perhaps, for here (as in *Helena*) there are moments when Mr Waugh writes with the graceful precision of birds in flight. Such a moment opens the story:

When Guy Crouchback's grandparents, Gervase and Hermione, came to Italy on their honeymoon, French troops manned the defences of Rome, the sovereign Pontiff drove out in an open carriage and Cardinals took their exercises side-saddle on the Pincian Hill.

¹ *Men at Arms*. By Evelyn Waugh (Chapman and Hall; 15s.)

A few more commaed clauses and Mr Waugh's debt to the early Henry James would be even more obvious. So much for stylistic echoes.

The echoes in theme, apart from the military ones throughout the canon, come principally from *A Handful of Dust* (1934) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Guy Crouchback finds in the second World War a crusade such as his ancestors had found in other centuries when they had set forth to battle against the infidel for the Faith. When he joins up, he takes with him a medal of our Lady of Lourdes and, if a guess may be hazarded, I suspect that in the remaining two volumes this medal will have some bearing upon a commando exploit upon which Guy may be sent and upon his marital position (his wife, Virginia, has divorced him). Guy himself does not emerge as a sympathetic character and Virginia's outburst that he is a 'wet, smug, obscene, pompous, sexless lunatic prig' has a ring of truth about it. He has none of the magnanimity of heart which his father possesses—a beautifully sketched-in portrait since, in Guy's attitude to life, there is reflected a certain woodenness of approach. He is what the Italians so aptly call *non simpatico*. At Santa Dulcina they respected, but could not love him—and the same fate awaited him as an officer.

Guy does not suffer from delusions: he does not believe that in times of crisis the working classes automatically become inured to his own class, but rather that in his platoon as it happened the thirty men under his command had a distinct liking for him. Yet, although he was prepared to die for any of them in action and 'knew every name', he was not able to distinguish among them as individuals. That, too, is true of his relationship with Virginia after her divorce and may well have caused it in the first place. For if his behaviour to her is very human, or at least understandable, it is none the less human behaviour meted out to someone who is never regarded as a human being in her own right. For the religion which he practises suggests a Last Judgment in which men will be judged rather by the rules which they kept than the spirit in which they acted. In this conception of God the accent is on justice and retribution rather than on mercy and forgiveness. However, in

underlining these trends in his character it is important to reserve a final verdict, remembering that so far only one-third of his life as a soldier has been given. Mr Waugh's declaration that the novel is 'complete in itself' is nonsense if taken literally, because if that were so there would be no need of the promised successive volumes: the novel is only complete in the sense that it gives one portrait fully in the round—Apthorpe: Apthorpe Gloriosus, Furibundus and Immolatus.

Apthorpe is one of Mr Waugh's best comic creations to date. Of the recruits in Guy's batch of fellow officers, he alone looked a soldier from the time they first met. Burly, tanned in the African sun, he knows the military lingua franca of abbreviations back to front. He has a passion for his thunder-box and gear, and most of his adventures in billets and under canvas are concerned with their preservation: but the most moving part of his story occurs when he lies dying, semi-delirious, in an army hospital up-country from the Cape. 'They don't realise how ill I am. They keep bringing me jig-saws and Ian Hay. A dam' fool woman, wife of a box-wallah here, offered to teach me to crochet.' It is a case of 'I ask you, old man, I just ask you'. Then, when his bout of exasperation subsides, he asks Guy a favour. 'I'll take some killing. But it's all a question of the will to live.' He must set everything in order lest they wear him down and he makes Guy promise that, if he should die, he will see that his thunder-box and gear (which he left partly at the Commodore's, Southsand, and in Cornwall where they camped) shall be given not to his aunt, but to a friend Chatty Corner. As long as that is done, everything else can go to her. It is quite safe to arrange that, even though it may not be strictly legal, and one is left for the last time with a picture of Apthorpe, contented and merry, giggling with pleasure at his own cleverness 'like Mr Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*'.

Apthorpe's role in the book when the trilogy is finished may assume proportions beyond that of excellent comic relief because, throughout this first instalment, paragraphs and odd sentences are used to scan both time and place so that the canvas moves from the particular to the general

and back again. Here is an example: the night before leave begins.

At length [in the officers' mess] when the cloth was drawn for dessert, the bress departed and the strings came down from the minstrels' gallery and stationed themselves in the window embrasure. Now there was silence over all the diners while the musicians softly bowed and plucked. It all seemed a long way from Tony's excursions in no-man's-land; farther still, immeasurably far, from the frontier of Christendom where the great battle had been fought and lost; from those secret forests where the trains were, even then, while the Halberdiers and their guests sat bemused by wine and harmony, rolling east and west with their doomed loads.

The fusion of past and present, civilian and soldier, music and warfare is carefully built up, and then, in the last sentence of the paragraph, the comparative peace of regimental soldiering (even under possible fire) is contrasted with what was occurring in Europe, but was not known fully outside Europe until a later date. The telescoping which time allows brings historical perspective so that the novelist, writing a decade later, is able to show the see-saw movement by which, in varying degrees, the actions of the wicked may be balanced by the actions of the good; to hint at that Divine Plan by which, metaphorically and in fact, the crooked may be made straight. For wars are a reflection of the nature of man wherein good and ill perpetually contend or domination—the cause of which is original sin. Which is why, though men may proclaim their pacific intentions, filling their newspapers with conferences about disarmament and arbitration, old colonels sitting in their club rooms know that everlasting peace is a vain hope; and their brushing aside of such a hope is not so much the result of a primitive kind of horse-sense and neglect of the Incarnation as an indirect v.c. acceptance of men's fallen natures. Wars may be terrible things and they may know that people do not want them; but they also know instinctively that though people 'desire peace they do not desire the things which lead to peace'. True, their language would not be couched in phrases so flowing as those of Thomas à Kempis, their comments being cruder and gruffer and yet still belonging to that same tradition. For as far as reality is concerned, the soldier's understanding is often not unlike the monk's.