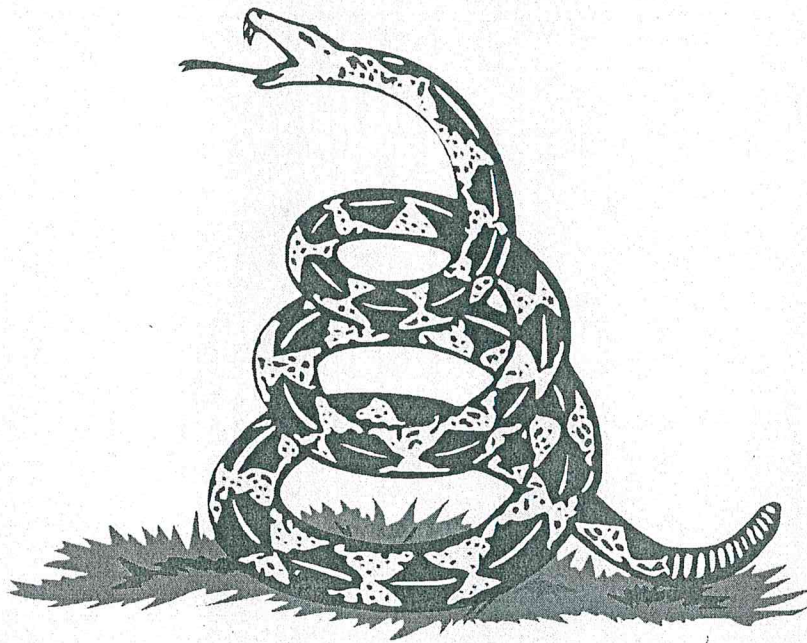


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THE CASE FOR HUMAN NATURE
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THE FREEMAN BOOK



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THE CASE FOR HUMAN NATURE

WHEN the housemaid broke the crock and blamed the cat she created a precedent that has been followed to this day by housemaids of all nationalities. Unfortunately, the precedent has been adopted by servants more highly paid than housemaids as a class are even now apt to be, so that one now finds statesmen, diplomats, and editors resorting to her subterfuge in blaming "human nature" for ruining their pet policies. This expedient for shifting responsibility from the shoulders of political and ecclesiastical rulers, which has been in vogue ever since the day when Aaron cast "the other lot for the scapegoat," is being challenged on the score of inefficiency, apparently, for it somehow fails to carry off "iniquities unto a land not inhabited." This system of loading transgressions upon the head of the scapegoat is all very well as a ceremonial, but as a practical method, experience seems to show that it does not by any means come up to the prospectus. It is one thing to put sins on the head of the scapegoat, and quite another thing to make them stick there. The trouble is they do not stick there. They fall off again at once, and the scapegoat goes off about the freedom which he has obtained under scandalously false pretences.

So it has eminently been with the scapegoats of Europe which have been severally sent by the Aarons of this century into the wilderness. They have with such unfailing regularity played hookey that one cannot help feeling that the mechanics of transgression-shirking ought to be revised and brought down to date. From Napoleon and Pitt to Kruger and the Mad Mullah our responsible authorities had invested heavily in a long procession of scapegoats, without receiving any dividends worth talking about: and yet in the autumn of 1914 the undiscouraged high priests of the Allies selected the Kaiser for the journey into the

wilderness. Then, when the scapegoat showed an obstinate reluctance against service, they turned their attention temporarily to the head of the House of Hapsburg, and fared no better. Then some genius among them thought of Ferdinand, the autocrat of Bulgaria; and so on from one eligible monarch to another, until they had about exhausted all the material that Europe had in stock. But death and abdication and one accident or another came in to interfere with the due ceremonial proprieties when suddenly, providentially, appeared the real thing in scapegoats—Lenin! Here was a find; and everyone was so sure of his eligibility and competence that they promptly placed upon his head all the transgressions they could think of—enough, indeed, to clear the whole political cosmos of the iniquity of ages past and to come. The vicarious sacrifice was made—made in a hurry, too, for there was no time to lose—and the figure of political morality and virtue, which had seemed to be getting a little swaybacked under the burdens, straightened up again and held its head high and unflinching, ready for any challenge.

But happily—well, the story is an open book, so why rehearse its disappointing upshot here? The scapegoat business has been regretfully abandoned as showing altogether too low an average of efficiency, and instead of sending into the wilderness a burden-bearer of collective sin, it is suggested that the case for sin and sinners alike is pretty hopeless and that after all, probably, nothing much can be done but leave them as they are and say as little about them as possible. It is poor old, recreant, incorrigible human nature that is to blame, and this discovery of our high priests has been promulgated more in sorrow than in anger. One says, "it is useless to reform anything while human nature is what it is." This counsel of despair seems to show that the diplomatic mind, in its virtue and in its disinterestedness, is overcome with disillusion and despondency. Another says, "we are all barbarians at heart," and one perceives at once the futility of every substitutionary effort since the days of Aaron. An editor of one of our great dailies tells us, "The painful events of the last eighteen months have somewhat dashed our hopes of being able

to reform humanity this year. All of us wish to end war, all of us know its horrors, but few of us have sufficient faith in human nature to believe that any given set of arrangements will make war impossible." There it is; so human nature, not Wilhelm or Franz Josef or even Lenin—hard as it is to part with him—has been at the bottom of all this terrible business. Human nature reversed the foreign policies of Europe; it made all the secret treaties; it schemed to form the armament and financial rings which have thrived in Europe since the year 1892; it lured the European government into Africa. It was human nature that deliberately made a false profession of fighting to overthrow militarism, autocracy, dictatorship, and bureaucracy; its promises of democracy, freedom, and peace were wilful deception. It fostered revolution in Russia, and made a Foreign Minister of Trotzky. It rejected the armistice terms agreed to by the belligerents, and drafted a military peace now admitted to be unworkable. It blasted the Fourteen Points to smithereens and sent rates of exchange on a downward course, the end of which no man can see. It raised the cost of living to the breaking-point, imposed egregiously unjustifiable taxation, and by consequence, spread discontent and unrest all through the masses who work for their living. On the spiritual side, it made jingoes of many leading pacifists, it turned liberals from the path of progress, it prolonged the war, insisted on the "knockout blow" and the blockade. It is human nature that is responsible for war, pestilence, and hunger; all the death and devastation in Europe is properly chargeable to human nature "being what it is."

One should refrain from forming hasty conclusions, but still, these suggestions seem to bear many earmarks of an alibi. Perhaps perversity, perhaps an inveterate partiality for human nature, perhaps something a little more substantial than either, counsels caution about accepting them. Surely neither statesman nor editor would suggest that any European people (human nature) had anything to say about the making of this war, or any of the wars that have arisen in its wake. In what way were the people of Europe (human nature) responsible for the outbreak of hos-

tilities? The documents and the secret treaties indicate that all told, including statesmen, diplomatists, military and naval staff officers, not more than five hundred persons at the very outside figure, had anything to say about the business. Never since warfare began has human nature had so little to do with the policy of making war and prolonging war. Not one general election in a belligerent country took place in Europe during the war; human nature had no effective chance to express itself. But one notices that all the Premiers, Chancellors, and Foreign Ministers, of the Governments that entered the fray in 1914 were driven from office with commendable promptness at the earliest opportunity and that President Wilson owes his official existence to the lucky accident of a fixed term.

Thus the case for human nature, on examination, is not so bad as it might be. One gets a distinct impression that human nature will stand a better chance of working out its own salvation if statesmen, diplomatists, and editors will do it the one inestimable service of leaving it alone. The present pessimism of the press makes a curious contrast with the fulsome optimism which appeared constantly in its editorial columns a year or so ago. Editors now despair of human nature because the peace treaty will not work; but bless you, the peace treaty was made in secret, and human nature never got within shouting distance of the little camarilla of half a dozen gentlemen who knaved it into shape. One reads that "the plan which might have done a good deal to make wars less frequent has been mishandled. We did not get and we could not have got a peace that would end war. We wanted it so badly that we once thought it possible; but we have learned something since then." Well, without prejudice, one may remark that precious few who now say they wanted it so badly did anything very noteworthy for it at the only time when such efforts had a chance of counting.

This ingenious notion of making human nature its own scapegoat is apt to fail: for in the past, human nature, in the shape of living human beings, has only too willingly submitted to the ignominy of being the scapegoat for ministers, diplomatists,

armament-makers and propagandists. There are indications that it has found the part to be tedious and unprofitable, and that it is ready to propose a change. Human nature is getting a little tired of economic imperialism abroad and economic exploitation at home. It has begun to see the fundamental place of those hoary iniquities in the political systems whose collision brought Europe to ruin. When the time comes, it is quite probable that human nature will give an extremely good account of itself in dealing with them, in spite of all the despondent forecasts of those who now distrust it.

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IN THE VEIN OF INTIMACY

THE editors of this paper and its publisher appreciate more than they can say, the unlooked-for cordiality shown by the press to its first two issues. Influential daily newspapers throughout the country have held out the hand of kindly hospitality and have given the paper a most prepossessing editorial introduction to their readers. Very courteously, too, have some of the weekly papers come forward with their greeting; and among these is one whose traditions command the utmost respect of all Americans, and whose specific service during the past two years has been immeasurable. Amid a riot of the lowest passions and the most contemptible prejudices, the *Nation* walked worthily. For this it deserves, and as time goes on will increasingly be seen to deserve, the lasting gratitude of all citizens whose loyalty is loyalty to their country rather than to its office-holders; and the *Nation* in its last issue does this paper the honour of generous praise and a cordial welcome into "the field of liberal journalism."

By gratitude, therefore, as well as unusual respect, this paper seems bound to deprecate with all possible delicacy, this recommendation to the *Nation's* readers. The *Freeman* is not a liberal paper; it has no lot or part with liberalism; it has no place in the field of liberal journalism and can not pretend to seek one. That field, indeed, is so competently served by the *Nation* itself