

TWELVE  
AGAINST  
THE GODS

*The Story of Adventure*

by William Bolitho

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

ADVENTURE is the vitaminizing element in histories both individual and social. But its story is unsuitable for a Sabbath School prize book. Its adepts are rarely chaste, or merciful, or even law-abiding at all, and any moral peptonizing, or sugaring, takes out the interest, with the truth, of their lives.

It is so with all great characters. Their faults are not mud spots, but structural outcroppings, of an indivisible piece with their personality. But there is a special reason for the inveterate illegality, or if you prefer, wickedness, of your true adventurer, which is inherent in the concept of Adventure itself. Adventure is the irreconcilable enemy of law ; the adventurer must be unsocial, if not in the deepest sense anti-social, because he is essentially a free

individualist.

This is what boys—those natural judges of the matter—have been trying to mutter for centuries, when fobbed off with lives of missionaries, or generals, where varied incident in vain ornaments an essentially unadventurous character. A feat, a danger, a surprise, these are bonbons Adventure showers on those who follow her cult with a single mind. Their occurrence even repeated does not constitute a life of adventure.

Here also we renounce utterly the comfort of Mr. Kipling, who believes commuting, and soldiering in the British Army, and buying English country houses, adventurous ; and Mr. Chesterton, who is certain that a long walk on Sunday and a glass of beer set one spiritually in the company of Alexander and Captain Kidd and Cagliostro.

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All this amiable misconception is as touching as the children's wish for a good pirate, for bloodshed in which no one gets hurt, and roulette with haricot beans. Tom Sawyer knew better. The adventurer is an outlaw. Adventure must start with running away from

home.

But in the mere fact that the essentially socially-minded, the good, the kind, and the respectable long to adopt the adventurer, it is clear that the opposition set between adventure and order, between the adventurer and society, is not exterior to humanity, but an inner antithesis, which divides our will.

The adventurer is within us, and he contests for our favour with the social man we are obliged to be. These two sorts of life are incompatibles ; one we hanker after, the other we are obliged to. There is no other conflict so deep and bitter as this, whatever the pious say, for it derives from the very constitutions of human life, which so painfully separate us from all other beings. We, like the eagles, were bom to be free. Yet we are obliged, in order to live at all, to make a cage of laws for ourselves and to stand on the perch. We are bom as wasteful and un-remorseful as tigers; we are obliged to be thrifty, or starve, or freeze. We are bom to wander, and cursed to stay and dig.

And so, the adventurous life is out first choice. Any baby that can walk is a splendid and typical adventurer; if they had the power as they have the will, what exploits and crimes would they not commit! We are bom adventurers, and the love of adventures never leaves us till we are very old; old, timid men, in whose interest it is that

adventure should quite die out. This is why all the poets are on one side, and all the laws on the other; for laws are made by, and usually for, old men.

It is this doublemindedness of humanity that prevents a

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dear social excommunication of the adventurer. When he appears in the flesh indeed, he can hope for no mercy. Adventure is a hard life, as these twelve cases will remind you. The moment one of these truants breaks loose, he has to fight the whole weight of things as they are; the laws, and that indefinite smothering aura that surrounds the laws that we call morals ; the family, that is the microcosm and whip-lash of society; and the dead weight of all the possessors, across whose interwoven rights the road to freedom lies. If he fails, he is a mere criminal. One-third of all criminals are nothing but failed adventurers; they usually get a stiffer sentence than the rest, the imbeciles and the hungry. It is when he imposes himself and gets out of reach of the police that society's reaction is most curious. No one cares to say that Napoleon, or Alexander, or Caesar, were worse men, before any fair court, than Deadwood Dick and Jesse James ; we try to digest them. The consequences of their actions are turned into motives ; boys are urged to imitate some version of their lives from which all their

disgraceful, but practicable and necessary, stepping-stones have been carefully removed.

To these perjuries and frauds, the respectable can plead “crime passionnel.” It is violently unpleasant to send a Napoleon to prison—though when they had to, they did it. But in another aspect of the social problem of adventure, the deliberate trickery of the adventurous into lawfulness, the altered signpost and the camouflaged cage, “we of the virtue” are harder to defend. These booby traps are always set; the recruiting sergeant is always waiting at the first comer for the runaway to sell him a uniform or a flag, but in unsettled times, when the drive to adventure becomes too general and fierce for any ordinary method of society to contain, law and order do not hesitate to descend to special ruses. So the wild riders of the Middle Ages were em-

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brigaded into that flattest of enterprises, knight-errantry, shipped off to the dull and most legitimate wars of the Crusades, or bamboozled into being a sort of blue police of the great highroad.

No, the adventurer is an individualist and an egotist, a truant from obligations. His road is solitary, there is no room for company on it. What he does, he does

for himself. His motive may be simple greed. It most often is; or that form of greed we call vanity; or greed of life, which is no more admirable, after all. But beware of underestimating this motive. Greed has been loaded with almost as many stupid insults as that other fundamental, sexual instinct; yet it would be gratitude for us at least, the adventurous race by definition, the insatiable Europeans, the conquistadores, to think of it as a virtue, a manorial virtue, out of which our difference from and supremacy over the contented breeds has demonstrably proceeded. God help the ungreedy . . . that is, the Australian blacks, the poor Bushmen of South Africa, those angelic and virtuous Caribs, whom Columbus massacred in the earthly paradise of Haiti, and all other good primitives who, because they had no appetite, never grew.

At the beginning of most careers stands an adventure, and so with states, institutions, civilisations. The progress of humanity, whatever its mysterious direction, is not motored by mere momentum. Let ethics make what it can of it. There is therefore a sociological role of adventure ; necessarily an accidental one, since it is in itself non-social. History is jolted along with great breaches of law and order, by adventures and adventurers. From the flint-jabber age to standing room in the subway, from a cave at Les Eyzies to the plumbing of New York, we have come by two forces of effort, not one ; the guard

and the search, made by the home-stayer on the one hand, and by the bold affronter of

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the New on the other. That is, by the adventurer as well as by the citizen. By law, but also by those who leaped outside its protecting palisade, caring nothing if they damaged it in the action, and augmented the treasures of the race by courage and not thrift. The first adventurer was a nuisance ; he left the tribal barricade open to the risk of the community when he left to find out what made that noise in the night. I am sure he acted against his mother's, his wife's, and the council of old men's strict orders, when he did it. But it was he that found where the mammoths die and where after a thousand years of use there was still enough ivory to equip the whole tribe with weapons. Such is the ultimate outline of the adventurer; Society's benefactor as well as pest.

On the strength of this sociological role then, the adventurer may depart on his high and lonely quest with some of our sympathy restored to him. He, our alternative self, has need of it, for the odds are against him. His first enemy we know, the mechanical, interlocking weight of law, social and moral. The second

is the Unknown itself. In so far as the nature of all living things is conditioned by their enemies, the adventurer is defined by his fight with Order, and his fight with Chance. The first he may win— if he does not, he will go to prison. The second he cannot beat, for it is a manifestation of the universal. This book contains no invitation to the life of adventure : that has the same end as all the rest. I do not mean that in our material categories an adventurer cannot be successful. Some, though not the greatest, have died of old age, on heaps of that they set out to get. There is a more subde tragedy that waits for adventurers than ruin, penurious old age, rags, contempt. It is that he is doomed to cease to be an adventurer. The law of his morphology is that, setting out a butterfly, he is condemned when his development is ripe

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to become a caterpillar. The vocation of adventure is as tragic as that of Youth ; its course is parabolic, not straight; so that at a certain point it leads back to the cage again. The greatest adventurer that ever lived ended as a nervous, banal millionaire.

The secret of this ultimate tragedy of adventure is psychological; it hides in the nature of the

adventurer's motive, swinish and god-like. It is interwoven in his personality. For this greed they have in all their five senses, for gold, for power, for vainglory, for curiosity, even at their highest moments, the greed for life itself, is dual. It contains the urge to keep, as well as to grab. It is retentive as well as prehensile. One of the fascinations of watching these lives is to follow the beautiful interplay of static and active greed in them, the slow advantage of conservation creeping upon acquisition, the sudden incursion of fear, the fear to which even Alexander sacrificed in his tent, when he knew he had won too much and the adventure was over, which is the sign of conservation's progress within him, and the inevitable deadening of its complement that follows.

For these are men betrayed by contradiction inside themselves. Their mixture differs from ours only in its proportions ; in them too is a social man at war with a free man, miser as well as spendthrift, stay-at-home as well as rolling stone, hoarder and gambler, shepherd and hunter. It is his own social self that trips up the adventurer, and strangles him.

Above these closely related sociological and psychological struggles of the adventurer there is another, sublimely interesting, transcendent to both : the fight, which is like a wooing of the unknown, whose names are also chance, danger, inexhaustible container of everything

that is new. It is with desire of her, herself inseparable from her gifts, that he is greedy. It is her perfidy—here is her majesty and

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cruelly—that loads him with prizes, that muffles him with the veils of her benevolence, to chain him with gold and victories so that he dares not go on, to change him from a lover into a slave. It is when the pirates count their booty, that they become mere thieves.

So much for the main outline, sociological, psychological and in a sense mystical, of adventurer and adventure, which I hope these twelve practical researches that follow will fill in with many curious and interesting variations. Among them there will be found two or three women, out of the few that so far have clearly merited to be in the sublime company by the size and originality of their fate. During the interminable age (which however seems just ending), in which marriage was the career of women, it might be defended that every woman's life contained an adventure; and that every woman of marriageable age was an adventuress, just as married women are society's irreducible bodyguard. This is the old novelists' thesis—the stereotype of that adventure, and its banality puts it

outside our scope. But now that times are changing, the once purely speculative question as to whether women, outside the simple limits of their economic dependence on man, could feel and follow adventure has become important, and any light the study of undoubted woman-adventurers (adventuresses is a question-begging epithet) of the past can throw on this, and any evidence for or against a different morphology of the sexes in adventure will be interesting.

It is evident that the varying resistances of the three formative elements, that is, the social complex, the field, and the psychology of the adventurer, alter not only adventure's features—since every age produces its peculiar type, conquerors in antiquity, discoverers in the Middle Ages, prospectors in the nineteenth century—but its quantity and incidence, at any rate from the point of view of the historian.

Of these we must neglect the third, supposing it constant since we cannot estimate it. But it is obvious enough that the influence of the other two can be expressed in a simple law: that adventure is harder, rarer, and less important, according to the strength of the social tie, and to the narrowing of the field of the unknown. Both these adverse conditions are in operation to-day. We are far from an international government, but we already have an international police, with cables, posts, aeroplanes and a

general similarity of codes and understanding at its service, which would make short work to-day of the adventurous lives of a Cellini, a Casanova, a Cagliostro. This ecumenical civilisation, as Keyserling calls it, allows less and less space for the individual. Concurrently the field has cramped with the mapping of the world. The geographical unknown, the easiest of access and the most naively alluring, has gone. There is a telephone wire to Lhasa, flags on each Pole, and though from time to time a few indomitable ladies try to convince us that the Sahara is not commonplace, and romantic Travels to places in Asia—to which the tourist agencies will sell you a ticket—still dribble from the press, in the gloomy schoolboy commonplace, “ exploration is worked out.” Is adventure, with these handicaps, a thing of the past ?

I have already discarded the comfort of those writers and poets, who in the difficulty try to palm off as adventure what is only “ interesting ” and often only mildly interesting at that. Without descending to the adulteration of good notions, adventure does still exist, and even the adventurer, in his fortunate and aesthetic form, with a fate out of contact with sordidness, is no rarer than he has always been. There have been lean seasons for adventurers before, the eighteenth century notably, when everything seemed owned, done, mapped. In such times the new is to be

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sought inwards, not in immutable Nature, but in the ever renewed flux of human life. Geography has become banal, but topography is inexhaustibly original.

It is there that immortal adventure has taken refuge in our days, in the deserts of high finance, the jungles of business among the innumerable savage tribes that our great cities have disguised and not exterminated, in the human world, where there are greater spaces than between the stars. In the titanic works and events of our day there is the same hostile co-operation of runaway and stay-at-home, the same cult-struggle with the same enigmatic goddess, who asks all and gives all. History has always treasured a catalogue of adventurers—she has not changed her ways though she may not, for business reasons, be allowed to publish it.

As for the adventure-feat, the Atlantic flights, the polar journeys, the Everest climb, that flowering of heroism and endurance above anything in humanity's past, perhaps, which is the panache of our times, it only secondarily concerns our subject. The heroes of these things are the soldiers of society, not adventurers; only a misunderstanding which these studies may clear up could

make their friends claim for them the title. I shall have occasion to return to the matter.

What follows is intended, then, a little to elucidate history, more to illustrate it, to honour without hypocrisy the deeds of men and women whose destiny was larger, if not deeper than our own. Above all to shake loose the perception of the adventurer in us, and of us in the adventurer. To appreciate where I am not allowed to admire; neither to warn nor to encourage; in equal veneration for the insatiable spirit of man and for the inexhaustible mystery around him that he preys on, depends on, and worships.

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