

"Crazy Like a Fox"

Pelley of the Silver Shirts

WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY is "Chief" of the Silver Shirts of America, rip-roaring rough-riders of the magazine Liberation and intrepid antagonists of the "Judean swarm" and "communistic adversary." The Silver Legion last January commemorated the first anniversary of its founding. On the thirtieth of the same month, Adolf Hitler commemorated the first anniversary of his ascension to power in Germany. Here is Mr. Pelley's simple program:

Give me a quarter-million dollars to work with, all at one time, and I'll absolutely change the thinking of America and bring back our fundamental constitutionalism in a matter of months. Somewhere in the United States, sooner or later, there is going to be a person of means who will recognize that in saying this I have engaged in no idle boast. The quarter-million is going to be provided, the revelatory literature is going out in sufficient quantities to begin the actual end of this nightmare.

The public career of this man Pelley needs closer scrutiny than has been given it thus far by those recording the antics of his fascist organization. One hears little more than that he is "a former newspaper man," "a former movie writer," "a former Y.M.C.A. secretary," "a former spiritualist." One is left with the impression that he was a petty dabbler in a number of vocations and that, having made no go of any one of them, he is now dabbling in Red-baiting. Not so at all. For more than a decade before his turn to spiritualism in 1929, Bill Pelley enjoyed an enviable reputation and commanded big money as a highly adroit diverter of working-class and middle-class thinking. Under contract with the Crowell Publishing Company from 1917 to 1929, he was an outstanding contributor of short stories and human-interest articles to The American Magazine, a fat and prosperous conveyor of greetings from big business to Main Street. Surplus products of his pen graced the pages of Collier's, Red Book, Good Housekeeping and other widely circulated advertising media. His novels, "The Greater Glory" (1919), "The Fog" (1921) and "Drag" (1924), were widely read.

Writing novels and short stories was, moreover, only a side line with Pelley. He was interested primarily in publishing. His record in that line dates back to 1909 when, as a young man of twenty-four, he founded The Philosopher Magazine in Fulton, New York. He was, at different times between 1912 and 1920, editor and publisher of The Chicago Journal, The Wilmington

mont) Caledonian, feature writer for The Springfield (Massachusetts) Homestead and crime reporter for The Boston Globe. Between 1924 and 1929, while engaged in writing for the movies, he established the Pelley Press, a printing and publishing plant in New York City, and Hi-Hat Magazine in Hollywood. He was president of the Pelley and Eckels Advertising Agency in Los Angeles and business manager of one of the entries in the Dole flight to Hawaii.

As a movie writer Pelley did not do so badly by himself, either. He did the scripts for the following pictures: "The Light in the Dark" (Lon Chaney), "The Shock" (Lon Chaney), "The Fog" (Cullen Landis), "Her Fatal Million" (Viola Dana), "Jerry Out o' My Way" (Bert Lytell), "Ladies to Board" (Tom Mix), "Sawdust Trail" (Hoot Gibson), "Lady Bird" (Betty Compson), "Ladies Need Help" (Colleen Moore) and other well known pictures.

According to "Who's Who," Pelley spent 1917 and 1918 in Siberia as a Y.M.C.A. secretary. In connection with his experience there, the following extract from a biography of him (appended to a reprint in booklet form of his American Magazine article, "My Seven Minutes in Eternity") is of interest:

When America got into the War, through a combination of circumstances of extraordinary motivation, Mr. Pelley found himself in the combined role of Red Triangle Secretary with the Japanese in Siberia, consular courier, and war correspondent for The Saturday Evening Post. . . . Mr. Pelley was one of the first newspapermen to get into Soviet Russia with the Czechoslovak troops. He made his way 3,600 miles out of Siberia in the dead of winter with two civilian employees of the International Harvester Company, carrying many of Ambassador Francis' documents out to Consul-General Harris and President Wilson, along with \$750,000 of the harvester company's funds representing liquidated properties in Red Moscow.

Returning to America in 1919 an "authority" on the new Russia and the Far East, Pelley, in six articles for Sunset, a magazine published in California, and in two for World Outlook, told the American public what big business wanted it to know about those places.

Now, in the light of the facts presented thus far, let us size up the "Chief" of the Silver Shirts. Obviously, Pelley is not an illiterate. It is clear, on the contrary, that, in handling the machinery of "public enlightenment," he is no tyro. Having for nearly a decade shouldered with big ad-

were ruled by the standards of the public they exploited. Individualism had deserted the forum, the marketplace, and was taking refuge in marginal doctrines, in the past, in exile or in dreams. And it found no safety there: on the contrary, it was being forced to acknowledge its defeat. The individualistic way of life was even failing to produce individuals. In their flight from social uniformity, artists were likely to choose uniform paths of escape and obey the conventions of their own small groups; even their abnormalities of conduct belonged to fixed types; even in the neuroses from which more and more of them suffered they followed established patterns.

About this time there began to be gestures toward a reconciliation with society. Thornton Wilder wrote a Christian novel, which became enormously successful—Hemingway joined the Catholic Church—the Harvard and Princeton Humanists began to be taken more seriously—dozens of young men followed T. S. Eliot's example and called themselves royalists, Catholics and classicists—the Tennessee Agrarians issued manifestoes calling for a return to the sort of rural life that had been lived in the South before the Civil War. All of these acts and doctrines might be regarded as forms of escape, but not in the sense in which I have been using the word in the preceding pages. All of them were directed toward an escape from the present into a more desirable past—as represented by Greece, the Middle Ages or the Cotton Kingdom—but they did not suggest that we should merely evade the social responsibilities of our time. On the contrary, the adherents of these movements were eager to assume political obligations. In order to work for a restoration of past conditions, they were ready to ally themselves with certain representatives of the present order. Some of their projects—and the natural hostility toward them on the part of most young writers—were clarified during the otherwise absurd and fruitless debate about Humanism, which started almost at the moment of the Wall Street crash.

Long before the results of the crash were reflected in unemployment figures and graphs of business inactivity, there was in the air a disturbing whisper of change. Seward Collins, then a Humanist and the editor of *The Bookman*, wrote a vindictive "Farewell to the Twenties." Reading it, one had for the first time a feeling of having belonged to a literary period that might have been mistaken in its general aims. This feeling was reinforced by other events. Two or three writers committed suicide for reasons that were artistic rather than financial. It was as if they had wished to write in their own blood that an era was ending, and their deaths were so interpreted.

Long before the international crisis of 1931, writers were convinced that they had been wrong in one of their original assumptions. It was true that the present system could not provide

provide for men's physical needs, could not feed and clothe them. This was a new element in their picture of the world. For the rest, however, the depression merely hastened a process of readjustment that had begun already. The refugees from America often thought vaguely of coming home; now the depression was forcing them home by cutting off their incomes. They had wondered whether it might not be best to ally themselves with society; now they were compelled to make this alliance for the sake of self-preservation; they were compelled to recognize the importance to themselves of all the things they had believed to be futile.

But at this point they made another discovery. They found that society was not a dull abstraction, a gray fog in which they could lose themselves or from which they could run away—it was real, tangible and full of contradictions that were daily becoming more self-evident. Here were wages cut and dividends increased; here were speculators fattening on the general misery; here were breadlines in Times Square, in the midst of skysigns advertising all the luxuries they couldn't buy; here were overproduction and underconsumption, machines standing idle and men waiting in the snow without overcoats, men hungry while wheat was being burned on the prairies, fruit rotting unpicked, milk dumped into gutters—and here were social classes in conflict, sinking, rising, struggling to hold power or merely fighting for enough to eat.

If one seeks for an explanation of the new political climate that followed the depression, there is no use invoking the missionary zeal of the Comintern or the bones of Karl Marx. There is a homelier reason for it. Once a writer had recognized that society contained hostile classes, that the result of their conflict was uncertain and would affect his own fortunes, then he ceased to believe that political action was silly: he became "politicalized." If he also decided that the class whose interests lay closest to his own was the working class, that the home he was seeking lay with them, he became a radical. When the change took place, it was almost as simple as that.

MALCOLM COWLEY.

American Jeremiad

It's pretty hard to sing of moonlight now,
Of benches in the park and lovers' lanes.
I'd like to if I could, but here somehow
Are shadows, beggars, shadows, and the rain's
A dripping, soppy, clammy winding-sheet
Indifferent to the tragedies of men,
Indifferent as the many passing feet
That make the beggars rise and drop again.

What shall a lover sing when half the land
Is driven cold and lives on dank despair?
As long as inhumanity's in the hand
That runs the race and whips the poor apart,
Lovers must all embrace a bloody air
And

in the pages of widely circulated magazines, he has brought to his present task of teaching the goose-step to hill-billies technical equipment of formidable proportions. In that respect, he stands head and shoulders above his fascist rivals. The supposition that he may be mentally broken, that his sudden foray into spiritualism in 1929 was the result of an intellectual collapse, has, superficially, a certain measure of plausibility. But even a cursory examination of the first few numbers of *The New Liberator*, the "psychically-received-from-discarnate-sources" forerunner of the current *Liberation*, reveals a hard-headed practicality that hardly allows of such a notion.

Pelley must be regarded essentially as a high-speed, high-pressure copywriter who is devoting his talents to the job of inflaming a potential army of hooligans to be used to break strikes, club workers and otherwise serve the sponsors of reaction. The hot effusions that sizzle in the pages of *Liberation* are the products of cool calculation and cold cash rather than of any inner disturbance. Hard-boiled, crafty, keenly aware of the mental make-up of the people he is hoodwinking, Pelley is dangerous and needs watching.

Abundant evidence of his skill is to be seen in his career as a "spiritualist." The manner in which he crashed the racket was spectacular. The story begins with his death in 1928. Oh yes indeed, he died in 1928. One evening in May of that year, while working in the study of his cottage in Altadena, California, on a story for *Collier's*, Bill suddenly dropped dead. He remained dead for seven minutes. This interval he spent, naturally enough, in Eternity, where he met some nice people and chatted with them about this and that.

Pelley waited nearly a year before coming out with the story. And to whom did he tell it? To the two and a quarter million readers of *American Magazine*, if you please! "My Seven Minutes in Eternity" was the lead-off, play-up article of the March, 1929, issue. Prominently advertised on the cover, and prefaced by a persuasive note from the pen of editor Merle Crowell, "My Seven Minutes in Eternity" received a grand send-off. And the fan mail was terrific! Pelley says so himself and we may well believe him. This is his story:

At first I was dubious about writing the article. It was a very deep personal experience and its nature was such that I did not care to have myself labeled a freak or a crank. But *The American Magazine's* editors persuaded me, and so the article was written and published. The circulation of this publication is around 2,225,000. Advertisers estimate that each copy of a given magazine is read by at least four persons. Which means that something like ten million people had access to that narrative, and because it was the first article in the magazine, most of them read it. I know because of my mail in reaction.

ie article itself was simple and straightforward and had none of the formal trappings of spiritualism. "Call it the 'caff'

call it Heaven, call it Purgatory, call it any one of The Astral Planes, call it a Hyper-Dimension, call it What You Will. Whatever it is—and where—that human entities go after being released from physical limitations, I had gone there that night." Pelley kept harping on the fact that he was not a spiritualist or occultist or psychic researcher or anything like that, but just an ordinary individual telling about something that happened to him.

But something or someone persuaded Pelley soon after that his future really lay in spiritualism, for about a year later we find him proclaiming that his "mental radio can tune in on the minds or voices of those in another dimension of being," and that he devoted much of his time to "hyper-dimensional instruction," and that his hyper-dimensional instructors had dictated to him, among other things, "a 400-page book on Political Economy so advanced in context and knowledge that it has surprised authorities on the subject who have perused portions of it."

The first number of Pelley's *New Liberator* appeared in May, 1930—and it was, in a super-astral manner of speaking, a "wow." Pelley, since writing "My Seven Minutes," had evidently taken a cram course in the psychic arts. But among such stuff as "Shambhala: Strange Mutterings and Rumbblings Are Heard in the East," "You Can Remember Before You Were Born!" and "Why I am Convinced the Dead Are Alive," is a psychically received message entitled "The True Significance of Present Russian Atheism," in which clairaudient voices announce that Russia and China are going to combine and that "the petty squabblings of interdependent European nations will be swiftly ignored in the mightier menace of a new influx of Goths and Huns battling at the Gates of Europe!" And there was another subliminal proclamation about a Great Foundation presently galvanizing into existence "which shall command International Peace, which shall make Herbert Hoover's war-relief work a Permanent Mercy."

Expertly printed on expensive stock and attractively illustrated, *The New Liberator* (its name was changed to *Liberation* in January, 1932) was from the start a mad hodge-podge of mystic twaddle and reactionary, chauvinistic demagoguery. For example, the June, 1931, number of this organ of "spiritualism" contained the complete text of a speech delivered by Milton W. Harrison, president of the Railway Security Owners' Association, to a Houston, Texas, meeting of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen. We need quote but one sentence from the speech to indicate its nature: "We are steadily progressing toward the goal of making everybody a capitalist."

In subsequent issues the clairaudient voices of "Great Souls" on the Other Side defended the profit system, called Henry Ford the "one great industrialist in America who stands head and shoulders above his fellow capitalists."

ings," demanded a navy second to none, got hot and bothered about the horrible machinations of the Communist International and otherwise indicated clear-cut class interests.

When Pelley, in January, 1933, after certain terrestrial conversations with Nazi agents, launched the Silver Shirts, he entered upon his new duties a Supernormal Adept, not only in Subliminal Knowledge but in fascist provocation as well. Also, he had an established organization to start with, the Fraternity of the Liberation, founded in April, 1931, and a money-raising agency, the Foundation for Christian Economics, established in November, 1931.

The anti-communist and anti-Jewish propaganda in the pages of the Silver Shirt weekly, *Liberation*, closely resembles Hitler's stuff, with liberal borrowings from the anti-Jewish material in Ford's *Dearborn Independent*. The organization's center of activities at the present time is Oklahoma City, where a newspaper, *The Silver Legion Ranger*, is published, and a quartermaster corps, selling uni-

forms (silver shirt with scarlet "L" on shoulder, blue corduroy trousers, leggins and tie) at \$10 apiece, is functioning. "The Legion," explains Pelley, "is not in the clothing business. The quartermaster corps in Oklahoma City is primarily interested in outfitting the Silver Rangers for active service against the communistic adversary."

The December 16, 1933, number of *Liberation* announces the establishment of a Washington bureau, offering a condensed weekly letter service to the business man "striving to hold his own against odds which he cannot successfully identify." "This service," Pelley says, "will have little to do with Asheville, North Carolina or Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It is another distinct branch of Silver Shirt expansion. . . . For ten months the Silver Shirt publications have been apprizing the general Gentile public of much of the skullduggery that has been going on in high places. Now . . . the business man cannot pay too high a price for accurate information as to 'what it's all about.'"

ARTHUR GRAHAM.

What's Happening in the Cotton Belt

BASIC improvement in the condition of the cotton farmer is not yet visible to the naked eye. Newspaper reports on the South that have represented it as leading the nation in recovery are misleading. The only improvement of economic conditions in the Cotton Belt has been the artificial business flurry created by the streams of government money that it has received.

In the summer of 1933 cotton farmers plowed up ten million acres of growing cotton. For this the government paid them, but since it failed to push the price of cotton above ten cents, the government then arranged to loan them ten cents on their cotton. Through the summer and fall of 1933 R.F.C. work and direct relief were administered. By December the C.W.A. program began to function. To tenants and other unemployed the C.W.A. was a life-saving device. It was literally new blood, not only to individuals but to whole communities. Along with it, direct relief continued to be administered both in money and in goods. Flour, butter, eggs, cheese, pork and oranges have fed people to whom these items are ordinarily luxuries. On a smaller scale clothing and bedding were distributed.

As the farmer begins his spring plowing for another crop he finds himself still shored up by his government. He has rented part of his cotton acreage to his Uncle Sam. He can resort to a seed loan or a crop-production loan to finance his crop. Perhaps a nearby P.W.A. project offers him or his family the possibility of em-

the acreage rentals and the Bankhead Bill, a ten-million-bale crop and fifteen or twenty cents for his cotton.

The winter has been hard for all, miserable for some, but federal relief has kept it from being intolerable. The system, however, is unchanged. Remove federal relief and acreage control, and the cotton country would at once sink to primitive conditions of life and society. Control of production is the only constructive and hopeful feature in all of the vast relief program that has been administered in the Cotton Belt, but whether controlled production can withstand its own effects on foreign production is doubtful. In any case, all other forms of relief in the rural South have been, as Mr. Harry L. Hopkins says, like dumping money into a sewer.

The new plan of rehabilitation of the farmer explained by Mr. Hopkins at the Atlanta Conference of Southern relief directors in March promises more in the way of permanent relief than any previous measure. According to Mr. Hopkins, rural families on relief rolls should be provided with land, housing, farm animals, tools and groceries and so be given an opportunity to care for themselves. About 120,000 Southern families need this type of relief at once. The plan is perhaps reminiscent of Reconstruction promises of forty acres and a mule, but it does offer more hope than mere pouring of relief into empty stomachs.

The South has had its share of R.F.C. C.W.A. money. The unemployed and the have-seen-it-and-received-it.