

CIVILISATION

Is it on the Verge of Collapse?

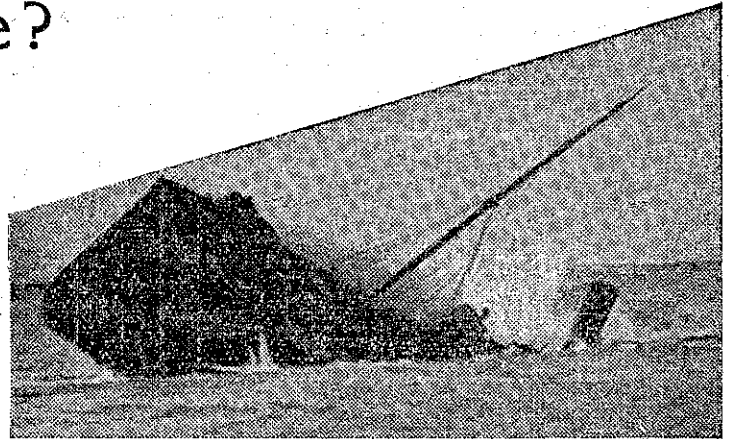
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from 3YA

I HAVE chosen this subject to discuss to-night because people have been telling us off and on for very nearly twenty years now that our civilisation is in danger of utter collapse and may very well decay and disappear like that of the Roman Empire. This mournful prediction started with the war in 1914, and is being made with especial frequency during the present economic upheaval. As far as my observation has gone, no one has seriously disputed the statement—it has been listened to with a vague and reverent silence, as though it were the word of God or one of His prophets. Personally, I have long been tired of it, and I do not think it is in the least likely to happen. I propose to give my reasons for saying so.

TO say that civilisation is on the verge of collapse, or that Europe will revert to utter barbarism, is a fine round phrase; but as with most fine round phrases, one should know what is in the pill before swallowing it. I think Mr. Garvin, of the London "Observer," was probably one of the first to trot it out; and it is still serving its purpose of scaring us. For instance, I arranged to give this talk on or about May 3; on May 4 I saw in the paper that Lord Leverhulme was prophesying the end; a day or two later Mr. H. G. Wells—as one would expect—was also at it. He said: "Civilisation is visibly collapsing. Every week something breaks down. It is impossible to see how far the ruin will extend." Well, I think that this is all exaggerated rubbish, though I do not wish to minimise the difficulties and dangers of our times.

The usual parallel—the "Morning Post," at Home, is, I believe, still very fond of it—is the case of the Roman Empire, in which civilisation did collapse and very nearly disappear, though it is well to remember that that was a process which took several centuries to complete.



Some of the problems of the Roman Empire were strikingly similar to ours, but there are also very essential differences, with some of which I propose to deal.

Before doing so, however, I suppose I should give some definition of what one means by civilisation, by way of clearing the air. Briefly, I should define civilisation as the sum total of human knowledge and its application to the comforts of life. So Vergil includes in the number of the blessed souls in Elysium, "Those noble bards who spake words worthy of the god they served and those who by their arts and inventions improved the life of mankind."

Now, in the first place, Roman civilisation, though a very great one, was merely local compared with ours. Secondly, the chief cause of its collapse was barbarian invasion. From this danger it was never free. The pressure of the Germanic tribes on the Rhine and Danube frontiers was going on intermittently throughout the first 400 years of the Christian era. It then became intensified as a result of (Continued on page 30.)

