



PELICAN S'EN VA-T-EN GUERRE
A Tale of War and Peace

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Pelican Record 19 no. 2 (March 1929), 34–6. IB was one of the editors of this journal, the magazine of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, from vol. 19 no. 4 (December 1929) to vol. 20 no. 4 (June 1932). The pelican, piercing its own breast and feeding its young with its blood, an allegory of Christ's sacrifice for humanity, appeared in the arms of the founder, Richard Foxe, Bishop of Winchester, and also in the arms of the College, whose emblem the bird became. 'A pelican in her piety' (the heraldic term) stands atop a sundial on a pillar in the front quad of the College.

An analysis of this story as a defence of 'enlightenment and personal liberty' is to be found in Claude Galipeau, Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism (Oxford, 1994), 12–14. See also Arie M. Dubnov, Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal (London, 2012), 46–7 and : Palgrave Macmillan) and Joshua L. Cherniss, A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought (Oxford, 2013), 20/105.



The Corpus pelican atop the sundial

Non decet noctu vagari
E tutela Bancalari.¹

Old Annexentricism

¹ [It is unseemly to wander at night, away from the protection of Bancalari.] At PI3 344 IB has 'non licet' (it is not permitted) for 'Non decet'. Percival Peter ('Percy') Bancalari was the scout at Corpus who looked after the College Annexe (built by Thomas Jackson) in Magpie Lane when IB lived there in his first year.]

ONE DAY PELICAN grew weary of standing perpetually on his narrow sundial, and developed imperialistic ambitions. He raised his head and cast a dreamy eye, now burning with horrid greed, upon the land of his pleasant neighbours, the Magpies. Pelican's mind worked swiftly for a stupid bird; on the very first black and stormy night he rose, mustered his feathered minions, stepped down from his sundial and marched darkling against the House that Jackson Built, which is the home of the Magpies to this day. The victory was incredibly grim and swift. The stout (but alas simple and unwarlike) magpies were subdued and driven behind their gates of oak: the land was annexed, and so obtained its name.

A Governor was sent to rule them, fierce and grisly to look upon, but the heart within him was as soft as wax; a child could write upon it. This, however, the Magpies could not know, especially as his name was Sinistrari. So they feared him in silence for many days.

There was one Robin lived among the Magpies, a fierce moustachio'd bird, violent among his meek neighbours. Day after day he would waylay each Magpie privily and stir in him thoughts of revolt. At last one evening he gathered the reluctant birds round the sacred kettle which has stood in its place longer than any Magpie knows (some say it fell from Heaven), and the reason why they worshipped it is this: whenever they were perplexed they would kindle the holy flame beneath it, and kneeling before it would confide to it [35] all their troubles. Straightway convulsions would burst within its womb and rocking weirdly it would shrill forth mystic oracles from its steamy throat. So they gathered round it on this troubled midnight, and the fierce moustachio'd Robin addressed it so: 'Kettle, surely the time for rebellion has come?' But the kettle, which (if only they knew it) was ever a server of the times, immediately gave forty gurgling reasons why it was better to submit.

Thereupon the Robin abused the kettle more hotly than anyone ought ever to do (and that in strange Nordic accents which made the magpies smile through their very tears), and finally in a burst of fury seized the offending oracle and dashed it against the floor. For an instant all stood still, frozen with horror. Then in a mad panic they rushed each to his chamber and shut their stout doors of oak and waited trembling. The Robin, amazed at his own courage, forgot to fly: he stood looking at the fallen kettle, whose feelings were of such a nature that a mere hint of them would

shrivel the paper that held it; it lay on its side and hissed and sputtered and foamed with threats, when a heavy footfall, destined to become all too familiar, was heard approaching, and the majestic Sinistrari appeared upon the scene.

The Robin (for it was too late to fly) flattened himself against a wall and did not breathe. Sinistrari took all in at one glance – his honest face twitched with indignation as he looked at the Thing lying at his feet. To him the kettle gushed forth its piteous tale of punished loyalty, adding that it always put its trust in princes. Soft was the heart of Sinistrari, but it was a Pelican heart: and a Pelican never forgets his duty. That is why those kindly eyes flashed so dangerously as they surveyed the unbroken wall of fastened oak behind which cowered the helpless magpies. And then he saw the Robin.

Fear must have given the Robin inspiration, for he acted most remarkably; he stepped forward and said quickly: ‘Good evening, Sinistrari, I feel sure that you have never heard of what the navy said to the bishop’s wife when she asked him what he was doing. “What are you doing, my man?” says she; “Nothing particular,” says he, “only”’ Twenty-four magpie eyes gazing desperately could not believe their own evidence: the stern mien unfolded in a radiant smile, made as if [36] to sneeze, then burst into such chuckles, giggles and guffaws, such wild torrents of saraic mirth, that the Magpies’ ears like Magpie eyes cannot to this very day believe that all this is true history. But true it is, nevertheless, that there was the Robin and there the Governor, each prodding the other’s ribs, exchanging merry anecdotes: heavens, how they enjoyed it! The kettle nearly burst of pique, but no one took notice of its babble. Soon all the timorous magpies were gathered there and the long passage rang and pealed with jolly, boyish laughter ...

The magpies fear their lord no more; they have now found a sure way to his heart, which they have discovered to be softer than honey. Prosperity and happiness have succeeded the Reign of Terror in Magpieland, and, as its citizens loudly boast, it is now little short of being an earthly Paradise.

There is obviously some highly interesting moral to be drawn from so long a story. I wish I knew what it was.