

21: THE NEW HOUSE

Within a stone's throw of my house they are building another house. I am glad they are building it, and I am glad it is within a stone's throw; quite well within it, with a good catapult. Nevertheless, I have not yet cast the first stone at the new house--not being, strictly speaking, guiltless myself in the matter of new houses. And, indeed, in such cases there is a strong protest to be made. The whole curse of the last century has been what is called the Swing of the Pendulum; that is the idea that Man must go alternately from one extreme to the other. It is a shameful and even shocking fancy; it is the denial of the whole dignity of mankind. When Man is alive he stands still. It is only when he is dead that he swings. But whenever one meets modern thinkers (as one often does) progressing towards a madhouse, one always finds, on inquiry, that they have just had a splendid escape from another madhouse. Thus, hundreds of people become Socialists, not because they have tried Socialism and found it nice, but because they have tried Individualism and found it particularly nasty. Thus, many embrace Christian Science solely because they are quite sick of heathen science; they are so tired of believing that everything is matter that they will even take refuge in the revolting fable that everything is mind. Man ought to march somewhere. But modern man (in his sick reaction) is ready to march nowhere--so long as it is the Other End of Nowhere.

The case of building houses is a strong instance of this. Early in the nineteenth century our civilization chose to abandon the Greek and medieval idea of a town, with walls, limited and defined, with a temple for faith and a market-place for politics; and it chose to let the city grow like a jungle with blind cruelty and bestial unconsciousness; so that London and Liverpool are the great cities we now see. Well, people have reacted against that; they have grown tired of living in a city which is as dark and barbaric as a forest only not as beautiful, and there has been an exodus into the country of those who could afford it, and some I could name who can't. Now, as soon as this quite rational recoil occurred, it flew at once to the opposite extreme. People went about with beaming faces, boasting that they were twenty-three miles from a station. Rubbing their hands, they exclaimed in rollicking asides that their butcher only called once a month, and that their baker started out with fresh hot loaves which were quite stale before they reached the table. A man would praise his little house in a quiet valley, but gloomily admit (with a slight shake of the head) that a human habitation on the distant horizon was faintly discernible on a clear day. Rival ruralists would quarrel about which had the most completely inconvenient postal service; and there were many jealous heartburnings if one friend found out any uncomfortable situation which the other friend had thoughtlessly overlooked.

In the feverish summer of this fanaticism there arose the phrase that this or that part of England is being "built over." Now, there is not the slightest objection, in itself, to England being built over by men, any more than there is to its being (as it is already) built over by birds, or by squirrels, or by spiders. But if birds' nests were so thick on a tree that one could see nothing but nests and no leaves at all, I should say that bird civilization was becoming a bit decadent. If whenever I tried to walk down the road I found the whole thoroughfare one crawling carpet of spiders, closely interlocked, I should feel a distress verging on distaste. If one were at every turn crowded, elbowed, overlooked, overcharged, sweated, rack-rented, swindled, and sold up by avaricious and arrogant squirrels, one might at last remonstrate. But the great towns have grown intolerable solely because of such suffocating vulgarities and tyrannies. It is not humanity that disgusts us in the huge cities; it is inhumanity. It is not that there are human beings; but that they are not treated as such. We do not, I hope, dislike men and women; we only dislike their being made into a sort of jam: crushed together so that they are not merely powerless but shapeless. It is not the presence of people that makes London appalling. It is merely the absence of The People.

Therefore, I dance with joy to think that my part of England is being built over, so long as it is being built over in a human way at human intervals and in a human proportion. So long, in short, as I am not myself built over, like a pagan slave buried in the foundations of a temple, or an American clerk in a star-striking pagoda of flats, I am delighted to see the faces and the homes of a race of bipeds, to which I am not only attracted by a strange affection, but to which also (by a touching coincidence) I actually happen to belong. I am not one desiring deserts. I am not Timon of Athens; if my town were Athens I would stay in it. I am not Simeon Stylites; except in the mournful sense that every Saturday I find myself on the top of a newspaper column. I am not in the desert repenting of some monstrous sins; at least, I am repenting of them all right, but not in the desert. I do not want the nearest human house to be too distant to see; that is my objection to the wilderness. But neither do I want the nearest human house to be too close to see; that is my objection to the modern city. I love my fellow-man; I do not want him so far off that I can only observe anything of him through a telescope, nor do I want him so close that I can examine parts of him with a microscope. I want him within a stone's throw of me; so that whenever it is really necessary, I may throw the stone.

Perhaps, after all, it may not be a stone. Perhaps, after all, it may be a bouquet, or a snowball, or a firework, or a Free Trade Loaf; perhaps they will ask for a stone and I shall give them bread. But it is essential that they should be within reach: how can I love my neighbour as myself if he gets out of range for snowballs? There should be no institution out of the reach of an indignant or

admiring humanity. I could hit the nearest house quite well with the catapult; but the truth is that the catapult belongs to a little boy I know, and, with characteristic youthful 'selfishness, he has taken it away.