

## OFF THE CHAIN

(December, 1910)

I was ill in bed, reading Samuel Warren's "Ten Thousand a Year," and noting how much the world can change in seventy years.

I had just got to the journey of Titmouse from London to Yorkshire in that ex-sheriff's coach he bought in Long Acre--where now the motor-cars are sold--when there came a telegram to bid me note how a certain Mr. Holt was upon the ocean, coming back to England from a little excursion. He had left London last Saturday week at midday; he hoped to be back by Thursday; and he had talked to the President in Washington, visited Philadelphia, and had a comparatively loitering afternoon in New York. What had I to say about it?

Firstly, that I wish this article could be written by Samuel Warren. And failing that, I wish that Charles Dickens, who wrote in his "American Notes" with such passionate disgust and hostility about the first Cunarder, retailing all the discomfort and misery of crossing the Atlantic by steamship, could have shared Mr. Holt's experience.

Because I am chiefly impressed by the fact not that Mr. Holt has taken days where weeks were needed fifty years ago, but that he has done it very comfortably, without undue physical exertion, and at no greater

expense, I suppose, than it cost Dickens, whom the journey nearly killed.

If Mr. Holt's expenses were higher, it was for the special trains and the sake of the record. Anyone taking ordinary trains and ordinary passages may do what he has done in eighteen or twenty days.

When I was a boy, "Around the World in Eighty Days" was still a brilliant piece of imaginative fiction. Now that is almost an invalid's pace. It will not be very long before a man will be able to go round the world if he wishes to do so ten times in a year. And it is perhaps forgivable if those who, like Jules Verne, saw all these increments in speed, motor-cars, and airships aeroplanes, and submarines, wireless telegraphy and what not, as plain and necessary deductions from the promises of physical science, should turn upon a world that read and doubted and jeered with "I told you so. Now will you respect a prophet?"

It was not that the prophets professed any mystical and inexplicable illumination at which a sceptic might reasonably mock; they were prepared with ample reasons for the things they foretold. Now, quite as confidently, they point on to a new series of consequences, high probabilities that follow on all this tremendous development of swift, secure, and cheapened locomotion, just as they followed almost necessarily upon the mechanical developments of the last century.

Briefly, the ties that bind men to place are being severed; we are in the beginning of a new phase in human experience.

For endless ages man led the hunting life, migrating after his food, camping, homeless, as to this day are many of the Indians and Esquimaux in the Hudson Bay Territory. Then began agriculture, and for the sake of securer food man tethered himself to a place. The history of man's progress from savagery to civilisation is essentially a story of settling down. It begins in caves and shelters; it culminates in a wide spectacle of farms and peasant villages, and little towns among the farms. There were wars, crusades, barbarous invasions, set-backs, but to that state all Asia, Europe, North Africa worked its way with an indomitable pertinacity. The enormous majority of human beings stayed at home at last; from the cradle to the grave they lived, married, died in the same district, usually in the same village; and to that condition, law, custom, habits, morals, have adapted themselves. The whole plan and conception of human society is based on the rustic home and the needs and characteristics of the agricultural family. There have been gipsies, wanderers, knaves, knights-errant and adventurers, no doubt, but the settled permanent rustic home and the tenure of land about it, and the hens and the cow, have constituted the fundamental reality of the whole scene. Now, the really wonderful thing in this astonishing development of cheap, abundant, swift locomotion we have seen in the last seventy years--in the development of which Mauretania, aeroplanes, mile-a-minute expresses, tubes, motor-buses and motor cars are just the bright, remarkable points--is this: that it dissolves almost all the

reason and necessity why men should go on living permanently in any one place or rigidly disciplined to one set of conditions. The former attachment to the soil ceases to be an advantage. The human spirit has never quite subdued itself to the laborious and established life; it achieves its best with variety and occasional vigorous exertion under the stimulus of novelty rather than by constant toil, and this revolution in human locomotion that brings nearly all the globe within a few days of any man is the most striking aspect of the unfettering again of the old restless, wandering, adventurous tendencies in man's composition.

Already one can note remarkable developments of migration. There is, for example, that flow to and fro across the Atlantic of labourers from the Mediterranean. Italian workmen by the hundred thousand go to the United States in the spring and return in the autumn. Again, there is a stream of thousands of prosperous Americans to summer in Europe. Compared with any European country, the whole population of the United States is fluid. Equally notable is the enormous proportion of the British prosperous which winters either in the high Alps or along the Riviera. England is rapidly developing the former Irish grievance of an absentee propertied class. It is only now by the most strenuous artificial banking back that migrations on a far huger scale from India into Africa, and from China and Japan into Australia and America are prevented.

All the indications point to a time when it will be an altogether

exceptional thing for a man to follow one occupation in one place all his life, and still rarer for a son to follow in his father's footsteps or die in his father's house.

The thing is as simple as the rule of three. We are off the chain of locality for good and all. It was necessary heretofore for a man to live in immediate contact with his occupation, because the only way for him to reach it was to have it at his door, and the cost and delay of transport were relatively too enormous for him to shift once he was settled. Now he may live twenty or thirty miles away from his occupation; and it often pays him to spend the small amount of time and money needed to move--it may be half-way round the world--to healthier conditions or more profitable employment.

And with every diminution in the cost and duration of transport it becomes more and more possible, and more and more likely, to be profitable to move great multitudes of workers seasonally between regions where work is needed in this season and regions where work is needed in that. They can go out to the agricultural lands at one time and come back into towns for artistic work and organised work in factories at another. They can move from rain and darkness into sunshine, and from heat into the coolness of mountain forests. Children can be sent for education to sea beaches and healthy mountains.

Men will harvest in Saskatchewan and come down in great liners to spend the winter working in the forests of Yucatan.

People have hardly begun to speculate about the consequences of the return of humanity from a closely tethered to a migratory existence. It is here that the prophet finds his chief opportunity. Obviously, these great forces of transport are already straining against the limits of existing political areas. Every country contains now an increasing ingredient of unenfranchised Uitlanders. Every country finds a growing section of its home-born people either living largely abroad, drawing the bulk of their income from the exterior, and having their essential interests wholly or partially across the frontier.

In every locality of a Western European country countless people are found delocalised, uninterested in the affairs of that particular locality, and capable of moving themselves with a minimum of loss and a maximum of facility into any other region that proves more attractive. In America political life, especially State life as distinguished from national political life, is degraded because of the natural and inevitable apathy of a large portion of the population whose interests go beyond the State.

Politicians and statesmen, being the last people in the world to notice what is going on in it, are making no attempt whatever to re-adapt this hugely growing floating population of delocalised people to the public service. As Mr. Marriott puts it in his novel, "Now," they "drop out" from politics as we understand politics at present. Local administration falls almost entirely--and the decision of Imperial affairs tends more

and more to fall--into the hands of that dwindling and adventurous moiety which sits tight in one place from the cradle to the grave. No one has yet invented any method for the political expression and collective direction of a migratory population, and nobody is attempting to do so. It is a new problem....

Here, then, is a curious prospect, the prospect of a new kind of people, a floating population going about the world, uprooted, delocalised, and even, it may be, denationalised, with wide interests and wide views, developing no doubt, customs and habits of its own, a morality of its own, a philosophy of its own, and yet from the point of view of current politics and legislation unorganised and ineffective.

Most of the forces of international finance and international business enterprise will be with it. It will develop its own characteristic standards of art and literature and conduct in accordance with its new necessities. It is, I believe, the mankind of the future. And the last thing it will be able to do will be to legislate. The history of the immediate future will, I am convinced, be very largely the history of the conflict of the needs of this new population with the institutions, the boundaries the laws, prejudices, and deep-rooted traditions established during the home-keeping, localised era of mankind's career.

This conflict follows as inevitably upon these new gigantic facilities of locomotion as the Mauretania followed from the discoveries of steam and steel.