

possible that the United States may be sitting meekly at the feet of at present unanticipated teachers.

## THE POSSIBLE COLLAPSE OF CIVILISATION

(New Year, 1909.)

The Editor of the New York World has asked me to guess the general trend of events in the next thirty years or so with especial reference to the outlook for the State and City of New York. I like and rarely refuse such cheerful invitations to prophesy. I have already made a sort of forecast (in my "Anticipations") of what may happen if the social and economic process goes on fairly smoothly for all that time, and shown a New York relieved from its present congestion by the development of the means of communication, and growing and spreading in wide and splendid suburbs towards Boston and Philadelphia. I made that forecast before ever I passed Sandy Hook, but my recent visit only enhanced my sense of growth and "go" in things American. Still, we are nowadays all too apt to think that growth is inevitable and progress in the nature of things; the Wonderful Century, as Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace called the nineteenth, has made us perhaps over-confident and forgetful of the ruins of great cities and confident prides of the past that litter the

world, and here I will write about the other alternative, of the progressive process "hitting something," and smashing.

There are two chief things in modern life that impress me as dangerous and incalculable. The first of these is the modern currency and financial system, and the second is the chance we take of destructive war. Let me dwell first of all on the mysterious possibilities of the former, and then point out one or two uneasy developments of the latter.

Now, there is nothing scientific about our currency and finance at all. It is a thing that has grown up and elaborated itself out of very simple beginnings in the course of a century or so. Three hundred years ago the edifice had hardly begun to rise from the ground, most property was real, most people lived directly on the land, most business was on a cash basis, oversea trade was a proportionately small affair, labour was locally fixed. Most of the world was at the level at which much of China remains to-day--able to get along without even coinage. It was a rudimentary world from the point of view of the modern financier and industrial organiser. Well, on that rude, secure basis there has now been piled the most chancy and insecurely experimental system of conventions and assumptions about money and credit it is possible to imagine. There has grown up a vast system of lending and borrowing, a world-wide extension of joint-stock enterprises that involve at last the most fantastic relationships. I find myself, for example, owning (partially, at least) a bank in New Zealand, a railway in Cuba, another in Canada, several in Brazil, an electric power plant in the City of

Westminster, and so on, and I use these stocks and shares as a sort of interest-bearing money. If I want money to spend, I sell a railway share much as one might change a hundred-pound banknote; if I have more cash than I need immediately I buy a few shares. I perceive that the value of these shares oscillates, sometimes rather gravely, and that the value of the alleged money on the cheques I get also oscillates as compared with the things I want to buy; that, indeed, the whole system (which has only existed for a couple of centuries or so, and which keeps on getting higher and giddier) is perpetually swaying and quivering and bending and sagging; but it is only when such a great crisis occurs as that of 1907 that it enters my mind that possibly there is no limit to these oscillations, that possibly the whole vast accidental edifice will presently come smashing down.

Why shouldn't it?

I defy any economist or financial expert to prove that it cannot. That it hasn't done so in the little time for which it has existed is no reply at all. It is like arguing that a man cannot die because he has never been known to do so. Previous men have died, previous civilisations have collapsed, if not of acute, then of chronic financial disorders.

The experience of 1907 indicated very clearly how a collapse might occur. A panic, like an avalanche, is a thing much easier to start than stop. Previous panics have been arrested by good luck; this last one in

America, for example, found Europe strong and prosperous and helpful. In every panic period there is a huge dislocation of business enterprises, vast multitudes of men are thrown out of employment, there is grave social and political disorder; but in the end, so far, things have an air of having recovered. But now, suppose the panic wave a little more universal--and panic waves tend to be more extensive than they used to be. Suppose that when securities fall all round, and gold appreciates in New York, and frightened people begin to sell investments and hoard gold, the same thing happens in other parts of the world. Increase the scale of the trouble only two or three times, and would our system recover? Imagine great masses of men coming out of employment, and angry and savage, in all our great towns; imagine the railways working with reduced staffs on reduced salaries or blocked by strikers; imagine provision dealers stopping consignments to retailers, and retailers hesitating to give credit. A phase would arrive when the police and militia keeping order in the streets would find themselves on short rations and without their weekly pay.

What we moderns, with our little three hundred years or so of security, do not recognise is that things that go up and down may, given a certain combination of chances, go down steadily, down and down.

What would you do, dear reader--what should I do--if a slump went on continually?

And that brings me to the second great danger to our modern

civilisation, and that is War. We have over-developed war. While we have left our peace organisation to the niggling, slow, self-seeking methods of private enterprise; while we have left the breeding of our peoples to chance, their minds to the halfpenny press and their wealth to the drug manufacturer, we have pushed forward the art of war on severely scientific and Socialist lines; we have put all the collective resources of the community and an enormous proportion of its intelligence and invention ungrudgingly into the improvement and manufacture of the apparatus of destruction. Great Britain, for example, is content with the railways and fireplaces and types of housing she had fifty years ago; she still uses telephones and the electric light in the most tentative spirit; but every ironclad she had five-and-twenty years ago is old iron now and abandoned. Everything crawls forward but the science of war; that rushes on. Of what will happen if presently the guns begin to go off I have no shadow of doubt. Every year has seen the disproportionate increase until now. Every modern European state is more or less like a cranky, ill-built steamboat in which some idiot has mounted and loaded a monstrous gun with no apparatus to damp its recoil. Whether that gun hits or misses when it is fired, of one thing we may be absolutely certain--it will send the steamboat to the bottom of the sea.

Modern warfare is an insanity, not a sane business proposition. Its preparation eats more and more into the resources which should be furnishing a developing civilisation; its possibilities of destruction are incalculable. A new epoch has opened with the coming of the navigable balloon and the flying machine. To begin with, these things

open new gulfs for expenditure; in the end they mean possibilities of destruction beyond all precedent. Such things as the Zeppelin and the Ville de Paris are only the first pigmy essays of the aeronaut. It is clear that to be effective, capable of carrying guns and comparatively insensitive to perforation by shot and shell, these things will have to be very much larger and as costly, perhaps, as a first-class cruiser. Imagine such monsters of the air, and wild financial panic below!

Here, then, are two associated possibilities with which to modify our expectation of an America advancing steadily on the road to an organised civilisation, of New York rebuilding herself in marble, spreading like a garden city over New Jersey and Long Island and New York State, becoming a new and greater Venice, queen of the earth.

Perhaps, after all, the twentieth century isn't going to be so prosperous as the nineteenth. Perhaps, instead of going resistlessly onward, we are going to have a set-back. Perhaps we are going to be put back to learn over again under simpler conditions some of those necessary fundamental lessons our race has learnt as yet insufficiently well--honesty and brotherhood, social collectivism, and the need of some common peace-preserving council for the whole world.

THE IDEAL CITIZEN